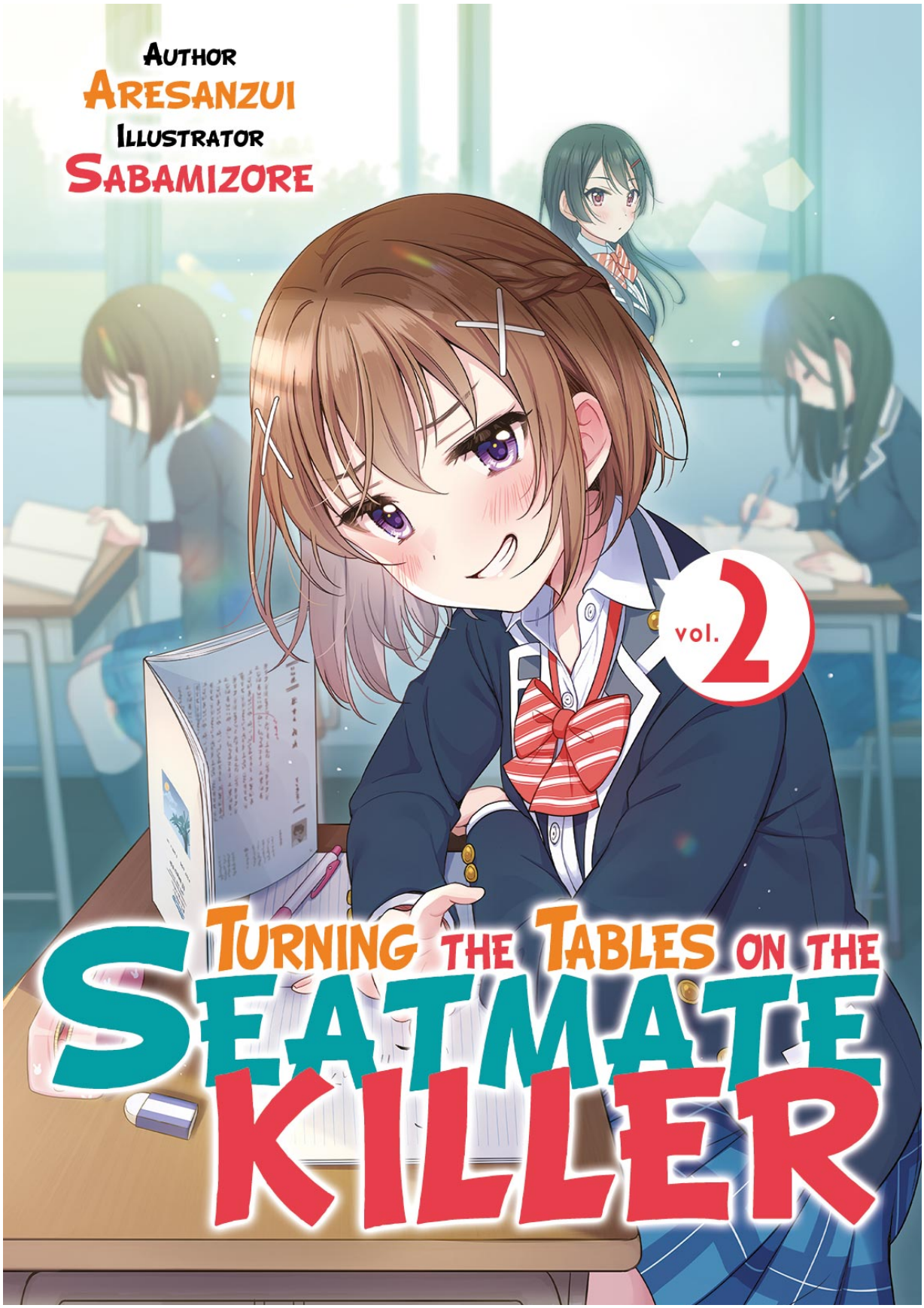
Author
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vol. 2
Turning the Tables on the
Seatmate
Killer

Rio Hanashiro
An ex-seatmate of Yui's
"RIO AND I HAVE OUR SUPPORT POINTS MAXED OUT!"
Yui Takatsuki
"The Seatmate killer"
Loves annoying Yuuki
WHAT ARE YOU STARING AT?
Yuuki Narito
A guy that lives at his own pace
(ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST...)

"HEY! THAT WASN'T FAIR! YOU'RE HACKING! CHEATER!"
"YOU SURE TALK A LOT OF CRAP FOR BEING A NOOB!"
Mina Narito
Yuuki's younger sister
Shy on the outside, outgoing at home

I...
Wataaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

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Chapter One

The Yes Ticket

Higashiseiyou High School. Year two, class one.

Amidst the clamor of an early morning classroom, Yuuki Narito quietly sat in his seat at the very back beside the window-- the seat of gods, as some called it.

It wasn't just because of its relative location that it, the seat Yuuki pulled in the latest seat raffle, got the name either. There was another, equally weighty reason.

"Morning."

"Morning." Yuuki replied to the shadow stretched across his side.

Standing there with a smile on her face was none other than one of the prettiest girls in school, notorious for making every one of her seatmates fall head over heels for her, Yui Takatsuki, otherwise known as "The Seatmate Killer".

Yui unassumingly pulled her chair back. She sat down, placed her backpack on top of the desk and began sorting through its contents.

Once finished she let out a fakeish sigh. "Hehe." She giggled, her head slightly tilted.

"...What?"

"It just feels a bit surreal, I guess."

"What does?"

"The fact that it hasn't even been a month since the raffle."

"I suppose."

"Time sure flies, doesn't it?"

"Does it?" On that note, Yuuki returned his gaze back to his desk.

Yui looked out the window, gazing into the distance. "Have I ever felt this way before? Hmm..." She muttered, sighing.

Yuuki ignored it, brushing it off as off-handed rambling. Yui turned forward, falling silent.

She had finally settled down... or so it seemed, only for her to shoot Yuuki a displeased look. "Mind toning it down a little? I can smell the gloom all the way from here." She nagged, raising her voice, her composure flying right out the window.

Yuuki knew from experience that playing along would just wear him out and that wasn't the foot he wanted to start the day off with.

He glanced over to her, holding an index finger up to his mouth. "My bad, now can you please shut up? I don't want to hear a single word coming out of your mouth."

"Awfully tall demands for just a quick my bad, don't you think?"

"It's just, your voice drags. I think all that running finally caught up to me."

"What are you, fifty?"

"We went to the park that day too."

"Where you did nothing but eat and sleep."

"My neck hurts."

"Sorry my lap wasn't to your liking, sire."

"No, your lap was--"

Yui's eyes shot open. "Lower your voice!" She exclaimed, her voice the considerably louder one. So loud, in fact, that several nearby classmates looked over in confusion.

Slightly pink in the face, Yui cleared her throat, readjusting her posture. She then gave Yuuki the side-eye.

Yui suggested Yuuki and her pretend to be girlfriend and boyfriend in Mina's presence, to help her make friends. Last week, back from a pretend date, they ran all over looking for Mina, who had yet to return home.

"Lap pillows, hugs. I'm gonna need to start charging you." The seatmate killer grumbled, in a bad mood as usual.

Hiding behind this persona was likely a tragic young girl who coped with some kind of deep-seated childhood trauma by making her seatmates fall head over heels for her, only to then dump them.

Yuuki didn't succumb to her charm. He didn't stoop down to her level. He swore he would treat the seatmate killer with warmth and kindness until the innocent young girl inside her resurfaced, putting an end to these silly games... as long as it didn't inconvenience him too much, of course.

Yuuki met her gaze with a lukewarm one. "Any chronic pain you want to tell me about?"

"Can we stop with the retiree jokes already." Yui frowned, only to quickly turn it upside down, leaning over Yuuki's Desk. "Whatcha doin' there? Oh dear, studying? In a place like this?"

"School, you mean? Midterms start next weekend."

What do you think school's for? This is exactly why I didn't want to talk to you.

Yuuki tapped his workbook with his pen, Yui's face twisting "Ah yes, It's that time of the year already. Wish it was that time every four or more years, but anyway. Yuuki, how'd you do on your midterms? Just so I can get an idea of how much you're packing upstairs."

"I forgot."

"Your best subject?"

"Forgot that too."

"If you don't wanna talk then just say so, jeez."

I fool you twice and you're shaming me? Shouldn't that be the other way around?

As Yuuki was just about to explain that he did, in fact, not wanna talk, Yui smirked. "Oh, I know. You're just too embarrassed to say."

"No, I got a ninety on my math midterm."

"Jogged your memory, I see."

"And you?"

"Heh, I got a ninety-two on my Spanish midterm!"

"No, your math midterm."

"Matemáticas!" She dodged the question, turning her head forward. Just as Yuuki was about to gaze down at his desk, thinking the conversation was over, she whipped her head back toward him. "How about a friendly competition then?"

First your silly love games, now this?

Yuuki felt tempted to respond with a no, but, remembering he decided to try and play along with Yui's antics to the best of his ability, he instead nodded. "Sure. Why not."

"Is it just me or did you look really indifferent about it for a second there?"

Stay strong. Stay calm.

Unclear whether or not Yui understood Yuuki's struggle, she tilted her head, a mischievous smile on her face. "And what do I get if I win?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Just thinking of all the things I could make you do if I win."

"Like what? Rub your shoulders?"

"Are you my affectionate son?"

"Would you prefer a shoulder massage ticket?"

“No. Keep it.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Hmm, let’s see. How about...” Yui gazed up at the ceiling, folding her arms. Her eyes suddenly narrowed, a grin spreading across her face. “Oh, I know. How about a yes ticket?”

“A yes ticket?”

“You must say yes to everything the other person tells you.”

I should’ve known that grin meant she was up to no good. Don’t know what’s so fun about ordering others around but it’s definitely a sign of a twisted heart.

“And if I win, you’ll untwist your heart.”

“I’ll what?”

“Forget it, yes ticket it is.”

“Just to be clear, I’m not talking about tickets to a yes concert.”

“Yes, yes.”

“No, you don’t understand. If you lose, you’ll have to do anything I tell you. Show some fighting spirit!”

“Why? Not like I’m legally binded to or anything.”

“Don’t think you can just conveniently back out when things don’t go your way.”

It appears I’ve been seen through.

Yuuki, fearing she’d start grumbling again, decided to play along. “Either way, I’m not losing to someone who’s too afraid to reveal their midterm scores.”

“Oh, you’re done for. Just wait till I bust out my secret weapon.” Yui said, furiously typing away at her phone.

This secret weapon is... not emerging out of a hole in the pool. Probably.

Yui’s fingers stopped. She lifted her head, her mouth twisting into a dauntless smile.

“Hehehe, you may as well start practicing party tricks now.”

“I’d watch my stockings if I were you.”

“What’re you planning?”

And so, the mind games began.

YUI
YUUKI
VS

***

Lunch break.

Yuuki set out to the bathroom after having lunch at his desk, only to run into a rowdy pair in the hall.

He tried walking past them, only to be approached by the needlessly well-maintained spiky, well-combed, silky haired duo.

"Yo, Yuuki. Fallen for the seatmate killer yet?"

"No need to put up a brave front, Narito. We'll always be here for you."

Standing in Yuuki's way, blabbering their mouths off, were his classmates Keitarou Hayami and Kento Sonada.

Forming the seatmate killer casualty league, the two had once professed their feelings for Yui, only to be rejected.

As much as Yuuki would've liked to ignore them and walk away, the two stood in his path like a forced encounter. "You two seem to be getting along."

"Yo, don't go lumping me with this idol crazed pervert over here."

"Refrain from calling me that, please. I find no pleasure in being lumped with a failure of a normie like you either."

The two locked gazes, sparks flying everywhere.

It appeared as though solidarity between the seatmate killer casualty league's members was at an all-time low.

"This guy started raving about idols completely out of the blue."

"Completely? Please, you make me sound like I'm some idol newbie." Sonada pulled out his phone. "You don't understand anything, Hayami." He muttered, taking a step toward Yuuki. Yuuki took a step back, only for Sonada to forcefully close the distance. "Look, Narito." He said, showing Yuuki his phone. "This is Miyorin-- my oshimen. Cute, isn't she?" Shown on screen was a close up shot of a smiling girl.

She was cute, sure, yet Yuuki couldn't help but feel an urge to show him Yui's picture--the one--and say he liked this one better.

But why add fuel to the fire? It'll only make him a hundred times more annoying.

Yuuki contemplated as Keitarou poked his head in from the side, peeking into the screen.

"Doesn't she kinda remind you of Takatsuki? Bro, I thought you were over her!"

“N-No! Yui Takatsuki just happens to resemble Miyorin!”

“What’s the difference?!”

And so, the two started fighting. Shoving and pushing, they almost bumped into a girl walking down the hall.

She shot them an angry glare, having just barely dodged out of the way. “Go outside if you want to act like a bunch of children.” Her voice was cold, piercing. She wore a stern, rigid expression, her almond eyes alternating between Tweedle-dee and Tweedledum. “I could’ve gotten seriously hurt, you know?” She scoffed, scowling at them.

The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Undeterred, Keitarou, a wry smile on his face, went, “Sorry, sorry but you dodged it, didn’t you? Killer reflexes, by the way. Haha...”

“Haha? What if I impacted the floor at a weird angle and ended up a cripple? Would you be willing to take responsibility?” Keitarou fell silent this time. She stared him down, frowning. “Also, what’s with the get-up?”

Keitarou’s shirt wasn’t tucked in, his tie loose, his chest exposed down to the second button; Warranting a warning if caught by the wrong teacher.

It seemed like she’d continue the onslaught, only to suddenly close her mouth, averting her gaze then directing it toward Yuuki. She gave him a firm glare before silently turning around, her black shoulder-length hair swaying as she stormed off.

Keitarou shrugged as he watched her leave, whispering, “Yikes, that’s one nasty stare. What’d you do?”

“Beats me. Who even is that?”

“Knowing you, I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d stepped on a landmine without even realizing.”

A landmine that left me completely unscratched? We’re strangers, what landmines are there to step on?

“Actually wait, you don’t know her? She’s fairly famous.”

“She is?”

Shock colored Keitarou’s face as Sonada stroked his chin, muttering, “Rio Hanashiro, Year 2 Class 4. One of the prettiest girls in school but certainly not without her issues, to put it lightly.”

Sounds eerily familiar. Yuuki now knew two of the prettiest girls in school.

She did, from what Yuuki had glanced, have a really well-put together face: commanding eyes, straight nose, pretty facial features. Add her slender

figure and you had a beaut different from Yui in type.

"What you saw back there was her default modus operandi."

"I know she's in the disciplinary committee and all but what's with the stuck-up tone? "Read one too many of those mangas, I bet."

"No, she was in the disciplinary committee, up until last year. That's just how she is."

"That makes it so much worse. What's got her panties in a twist anyway, talking down to an apologetic guy like me. Reminds me, this dude I know got into the same class as her last year. Said she'd nag him non-stop, 24/7. No wonder she's hated. Actually, how do you know so much about her?"

"Heh, because she and I are in a constant tug-of-war over the top spot. Rivals, if you will. I'm sure she keeps tabs on me too."

"Whatever you say." Keitarou groaned, frowning. "Either way, no amount of hot can save that one. No charm, nada, only a permanent 'watched my parents get murdered in cold blood' face. Sitting next to her must be torture. I guess you could say she's a seatmate killer... in a way."

"If Yui Takatsuki is the seatmate killer then I suppose she's the seatmate breaker. Instead of charming her seatmate, she nags them until their spirit is completely broken. Anything you'd like to add, Narito?"

"Wouldn't it be fun to see them duke it out? 'Zilla vs Kong style."

"Yuuki, I swear to... Wait, did she just go inside our classroom?" Keitarou went up to the door and peeked inside. "Get over here. Now." He whipped his head around, gesturing us over with his chin. "Look. You'll never believe this." Keitarou pointed toward a seat in the back near the window--Yui's seat--where the killers were having a nice, friendly chat.

"I've... I've never seen anything like it." Sonada squinted, pinching the arms of his glasses.

A curious smile spread across Keitarou's face. "Be a bro, Yuuki." He nudged. "Go listen in on what they're saying."

"I don't have the energy for it."

"Energy? You put on that innocent face of yours, you sit down at your desk, and you listen. Easy, yeah?"

That innocent face of mine? Before Yuuki could voice his protests, Keitarou shoved him inside the classroom.

Defeated, Yuuki tottered across the back row, over to his desk. He took a seat, put on 'that innocent face' of his, and listened or rather was subjected to their conversation.

“Pretty please with a cherry on top.”

“Oh, alright. If you insist.”

What Yuuki heard was Yui’s usual self and Rio’s unimaginably soft tone of voice.

He glanced over, only to see Rio standing beside Yui’s desk, all smiles. *It’s like she’s a completely different person*

“You haven’t even been taking notes? Come on, Yui.” Rio scolded her, giggling with a smile.

Yui sat at her desk, playfully swinging Rio’s arm around. “How you like my secret weapon, Yuuki?” She suddenly tossed the conversation over to him, lifting Rio’s arm up by the wrist. It appeared this secret weapon of hers was Rio all along. “Rio, Class four. She’s super smart, so I’m having her tutor me. I can already taste victory!” Yui explained as Rio locked a killer stare onto Yuuki.

Off-put, he tried not looking Rio’s way as much as possible. “You two seem to get along.”

“Oh, we’re max hearting it. No ribbon or ciao here.”

“Yui, please!” She said as her mouth busily shifted from closed to grinning and back.

She seemed awfully comfortable around Yui. *Maybe they go way back.*

“Are you childhood friends or something?”

“No but we were seatmates last year. What luck, right?”

The standard seating arrangement was boy, girl, boy, girl but exceptions did happen for one reason or another, this likely being one of them.

So no, they don’t go way back but they were also seatmates? Yuuki knitted his brow. *I didn’t think much of their relationship at first but this piece of information, it changes everything.* An intricate deductive web that would make Watson pale unraveled within Yuuki’s mind. *A bloody, gruesome battle between the seatmate killer and the seatmate breaker has already broken out, and likely concluded as well.* Judging by Rio’s demeanor, the victor was plain to see. *She fell to the seatmate killer’s wrath, succumbing to her wicked charm.* Such was the only reasonable conclusion. *It appears the seatmate killer hunts both men and women alike.*

“The dreaded seatmate killer...”

“Why are you giving me that face?” Yui feigned complete ignorance.

It was his first time seeing them together, so clearly, they didn’t spend much time in each other’s company.

Yuuki couldn't help but imagine Rio being called upon to serve as Yui's secret weapon. *Yet another poor casualty.* Rio was no doubt merely a pawn in the seatmate killer's twisted games.

While Yuuki once feared meeting her gaze head on, he now looked at her with pity in his eyes.

"What're you staring at? Got something to say?" She snarled, her voice strikingly colder than the one she addressed Yui with.

Of course I have something to say, but I can't just tell Rio she's under Yui's influence, not with Yui around. Rio wouldn't believe my words in her brainwashed state regardless. Yuuki fell deep into thought.

As if sensing something was about to go awry, Yui got up from her seat. "You're making the scary face again, Rio!" She said as she got behind her and put her arms around Rio's back, giving her a nice squeeze

"Nyuu?!" Rio let out the cry of an unidentified animal, her cheeks, her ears, her forehead turning pink in real time. "Y-Yui! G-Get off!"

"Relax, relax." Yui the evil poked her head out, clinging to Rio's back. "Look, Rio's not scary, she's moe!"

"And her face is as blushed as yours."

"H-Huh? When have I ever blushed?"

"When haven't you?"

"That's just hot blood rushing through my veins. Double the power level!" Yui blabbered off some nonsense as she petted Rio's head, playing with her hair. "Can't get enough of that silky smooth goodness. I told her to grow it out, you know."

"Can I try?"

"Stay away."

I was just joking…

Yui brought her face toward Rio's hair, sniffing it. "Mmm, what a lovely smell. Jealous yet?"

"Your smell is lovely too, Yui."

"Pff!" Yui's face instantly turned a shade of pink to rival Rio's. "P-Perv! Watch out Rio, he's got an odor fetish!"

"Why do you know what Yui smells like?" All the color suddenly drained from Rio's flushed face, an aura so menacing you could almost hear the gogogo's enveloping her.

Maybe I went just a little too far. Yuuki looked to Yui for help.

"What're you looking at me for?! You brought this upon yourself!"

Yuuki had been abandoned.

Rio leaped in front of him, protectively bringing her hand out in front of Yui. “Oh, you’ve done it now. Also, what’s with those pity-filled eyes?” Her gaze was antagonistic, brimming with hatred.

Yui inserted herself between the two, frantically shaking her hands in front of Rio’s face. “Rio, you’re doing it again!”

“I don’t like the way he looks at me.”

“He’s a bit of an oddball, you see. Don’t just sit there Yuuki, apologize.”

“Sorry.”

“See? He’s a kind soul at heart. There, there, it’s okay.” Yui pretended to pat Yuuki’s head,

which only made Rio’s face twist even more.

She’s a wild one too... Having sworn to reform Yui, tending to her victims was part of Yuuki’s job. *Introducing her to the other casualties might be beneficial.*

Yuuki pointed toward the door, where Keitarou and Sonada were presumably spying on them. “Come with me. Your friends are there, waiting for you.”

“Huh?” Rio turned to the door, Keitarou and Sonada promptly taking cover like a bunch of veteran spies. “What friends?”

“The ones over...” Yuuki looked over, only to see Keitarou frantically beckoning him over.

They can sense her menacing aura all the way from there.

“Excuse me.”

A proper plan of action appears to be in order.

Yuuki hunched over, slipping past Yui and Rio, only to be greeted with, “Have you lost it?”

However, the duo promptly exchanged delighted glances.

“Did you see that? Man, what difference a single smile can make.”

“Indeed. She might hate our guts but that smile... certainly packs a punch. If utilized correctly in a carrot and stick approach, even I might bend to her will. She breaks her seatmate’s spirits, reducing them to thralldom; hence the seatmate breaker.”

“I see.” Yuuki nodded.

“Now hold on a second.” Keitarou frowned. “The seatmate breaker? You’re seriously trying to force that? What a talentless, stealing hack, right Yuuki?”

“I think it sounds cool. The seatmate breaker. Has a powerful ring to it, no?”

Keitarou fell silent, pinching the bridge of his nose.

They exchanged banter, observing the two from a distance, when Rio suddenly turned their way, making a beeline straight toward them. “What are you staring at? You’re starting to get on my nerves.”

Rio gave each of them a firm glare, settling on Yuuki once more. Yuuki turned toward Sonada, diverting Rio’s gaze to him.

“It appears your luck has run its course, Rio Hanashiro.” The diversion attempt failed but Sonada jumped in front of Yuuki and began monologuing, so it worked out in the end. Sonada approached Rio, a bold smile on his face. “I believe this is our first time meeting? Yes, it is I, Kento Sonada.”

“Who?”

With one word she almost broke Sonada but he persisted nonetheless. “I understand it’s difficult to accept that standing before you is none other than the constant thorn in your side, the top of the grade.”

“Who? You’re in my way.”

Keitarou hastily dragged him out of the way as Sonada still refused to back down. “You heard the woman.”

“I understand it’s difficult to accept that no matter how much you struggle and weep, I’ll always be just out of reach, the top of the grade.”

“Top? You came in fifth last time. Just admit you’re nothing but a filthy otaku already.”

“No, you don’t understand, the seatmate killer threw me off my game! If you sum up all my grades from last year, I’m easily at the top!”

The grade’s top filthy otaku explained when, suddenly, Yui appeared.

“You okay, Rio?” Yui poked her head out from underneath Rio’s shoulder, pressing her body against Rio’s back.

Rio jumped, her stern expression softening. “I-I’m fine. They just got on my nerves a little.”

“Keep them in check, alright?” Yui gazed over everyone as she came in to diffuse the situation. Seemingly weak to Yui’s stare, Sonada and Keitarou looked away. “Okay, bathroom time! Wanna go for a quick piss, Rio?” Yui egged her on.

Rio’s face caught fire. “Y-Yui. How vulgar.”

“Ohoho. Care to join for a wee tinkle, Rio dear?”

“That’s not any better...” Rio wasn’t fully pleased but she went with Yui anyway.

As the two walked away, she shot them one last angry glare.

“Cut. It. Out.” Yui blocked her eyes off, throwing them a smile.

Yuuki found her smile fake, almost like she was forcing it. Keitarou and Sonada, meanwhile, were entranced with the seatmate killer’s smile.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

“Indeed. Two beauts, chumming it up.”

The two exchanged nods as they watched Yui and Rio leave.

Yuuki slipped away in their mental absence, finally free to visit the bathroom.

Chapter Two

The Seatmate Killer's Hired Assassin

The following morning.

Yuuki passed through the school gate slightly behind his usual time. Upon reaching the entryway, he heard a racket coming from the shoe lockers.

"Morning, Rio! Allow me to hold that bag for you!"

"Pfff. What is she, the school don?"

"Less chatting more greeting, people! You don't wanna make her mad!"

"Oh no, anything but that!"

The rowdy bunch's cackles grew distant, leaving only a single girl silently changing her shoes behind.

The school don? Yuuki glanced over just as she closed her locker, their gazes meeting.

Flowing black hair, tenacious eyes, a face lacking all expression. Further inspection revealed it to be the seatmate breaker, otherwise known as Rio.

Fearing a shakedown, Yuuki attempted to mount an escape.

"You there, hold it." He walked up to his locker and changed his shoes, ignoring her. Rio went right up to him "You have some serious nerve to ignore me like that. Narito, was it? We need to talk."

"Sorry, I'm booked for the rest of the month."

"What?"

"We can talk here. I don't mind."

"Come with me." She disregarded Yuuki's words, dragging him off to an empty hallway. Rio pulled out her phone from her bag, showing it to him after a bit of fiddling. "Care to explain?"

On screen was what appeared to be a picture of a uniformed girl and boy facing each other on the street. Whoever took it probably had bad hand shake because the image was so blurry it was hard to make anything out.

"Are they in the middle of practicing their afterimage technique?"

"After what? Don't play dumb with me. It's you and Yui."

"Me and Yui? Where'd you get that?"

"I, erm, I have my ways."

"What ways?"

"What difference does it make? All I want to know is if you and Yui are d-d-dating."

“Not a chance.”

No need to add that, well, actually, we pretend to be girlfriend and boyfriend in my little sister’s presence.

The tension in her concerned expression eased ever so slightly. “Okay, so if you’re not dating, then how do you explain this picture?”

“We just happened to go home together, I think.”

“Just happened to? You mean you cajoled her into it, leveraging your seatmate status?”

It appeared there were several misunderstandings at play.

I almost get the impression she’s unaware of the seatmate killer. Time to find out.

“Have you asked Yui out?”

“Hu-Huh? A-Ask her out?!”

It would seem even the seatmate killer wasn’t as thorough as to go after other girls.

Yuuki nonetheless had to warn her, as that could always change in the future. “Don’t bother. She’ll reject you.”

“Yes? We’re both girls after--” Rio had the most confused face but then she placed her hand on her chin. “I see. So this is your way of saying you want to ask her out but are too afraid of being rejected, yes? I caught you red-handed!”

“Not really, no.”

“Or so you say. Anyway, a friendly warning. Yui’s popular, so popular you’re not even in the same universe.”

“I know.”

“But she’s also helplessly kind to everyone. To put it bluntly, you’re getting the wrong idea.”

“Kind?”

“So, to avoid inevitably embarrassing yourself, stop associating with her. If she chats you up, tell Yui ’I don’t have time for you, woman. I’m too busy chilling with the boys.’ and ignore her.”

“Why.”

“Because dealing with misunderstanders like you is tiring for her.”

“Misunderstanders.”

“Why are you looking at me? Look, just, do as I say. I’ll even give you this Quo card.” Rio rummaged through her bag, pulled a card out from her wallet and held it out.

Instead of a shakedown I get a five dollar card? What luck.

"Let's go."

"Aren't you oddly cooperative?"

Yuuki took the card and parted ways with Rio, who had a satisfied look on her face, heading to class.

Yui chatted him up the second he sat down at his desk. "Mornin'. How're your studies coming along?"

He glanced over to his side and saw Yui wearing her usual smile. *Guess I have to ignore her for five dollars' worth of time.*

Yuuki gazed out the window. "Am I Buggin' you?" He continued staring out the window. "*Bu*ggin' you?" A bug sat on the window sill. He pulled out his phone. "Stop ignoring me." Yui ripped off a piece of eraser, chucking it at Yuuki.

Likely realizing the futility of her actions, she began fiddling around with her phone too.

Moments later, a notification popped up on Yuuki's phone. It was a text from Yui.

"Stop ignoring me."

Learn how to take a hint.

Rio told him to ignore her but she didn't say anything about texting.

"Attention starved, much?"

"Excuse me?" She replied, adding some strange stamp which read 'do you want a slap?'.

"I'm giving you *attention."*

"Don't need it."

"Ah, I see. Finally turning to the cold shoulder approach, are we?"

"Implying I've tried any other approach."

"Touché." Yui shot Yuuki a glare, who continued ignoring her. "*Look at us, texting each other all secret like. Getting serious couple vibes."*

"My fingers are getting tired."

"Aaand there they go with the wind."

"You could be studying right now."

"A once in a lifetime opportunity to have your way with me for a day and you're telling me to study?"

"Paw."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"So you choose stockings."

"I thought about that all afternoon. You plan on making me wear them on my head, don't you?"

Yuuki stopped responding, which appeared to have finally broken Yui. "Why aren't you talking?"

"I don't have time for you, woman. I'm too busy chilling with the boys."

"And other lies you can tell yourself." She shot back.

And with that, I believe my work here is done.

"Phew."

"Phew? What's with the 'I totally wasn't told to repeat this exact line verbatim' style delivery? It was Hayami, wasn't it?"

"No it was... what's her face." He gazed up at the ceiling, only to spot the devil herself outside the window. "Huh."

Rio poked her head out from underneath the sill, her eyes gesturing Yuuki over. It appeared she had made it there through the balcony.

Resigning himself to his fate, Yuuki opened the sliding glass door, walking into the balcony.

"Sit." Rio, crouched over, beckoned. He did as told. "You tried ratting on me, didn't you? Couldn't even do that properly."

"You didn't tell me not to."

"Don't you have any common sense? What are you, some kind of robot who only follows orders?"

"Should've given better orders."

"Better orders? You didn't even follow them!"

"Energy levels critical. Please insert a Quo card."

"Why you lousy no-good fuel guzzling hunk of junk!" She pinned Yuuki to the wall, her finger practically shoved into his face as she barked at him, her hair swaying in the wind.

How fragrant.

Just as Yuuki was about to lose himself in Rio's hair, a strange sound reached his ears. "Mhmmm." Yui gazed out onto the balcony with a skeptical look. Noticing her gaze, Rio promptly pushed him away. "Don't you two get along."

"What? N-No! H-He--"

"Rio you're surprisingly... whew."

"I-Its' not what it--" Rio choked on her words, her face turning pink. She shot Yuuki a glare. "I was just checking if someone's messing around on the balcony!" She declared as she whipped around, storming off.

Yui gazed at her, puzzled. “She’s... a bit of an oddball, that one.”

“A bit is an understatement.”

“Ouch. That hurts, coming from you.”

“Aren’t you to blame?”

“For what?”

It was only natural to think that it was Yui who messed up Rio’s mind. *The dreaded seatmate killer. Making an oddball out of a well-behaved model student.* The perpetrator, however, seemed fully intent on feigning ignorance.

“Still, that caught me by surprise. You wouldn’t believe how long it took me to get where I am.”

“Get where?”

“You’re surprisingly socially competent, you know that?”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“I know, I know.”

“Right, I’ll buy you DFC on the way home. Had an unexpected influx of cash.”

“Unexpected influx, you say?” Yui was beyond suspicious.

In any case, the seatmate killer’s ally, the seatmate breaker, proved to be quite the thorn in Yuuki’s side.

Guess saving the victim takes priority. Got to work from the bottom up. Though, there’s still plenty of time. Yuuki thought, flaunting the Quo card he got from Rio.

***

Year two class four’s classroom.

As lunch break rolled around, a couple of guys gathered at the desk next to Rio’s and started making noise.

“We going outside for lunch or what?”

“Quiet, she’ll scold you for misconduct again.”

“S-Scold me? Have mercy, queen!”

The bunch broke into riotous laughter which seemingly spread to their surroundings, spawning a wave of giggles.

Rio didn’t react, she didn’t even so much as glance their way, she just quietly got up from her seat and left.

She bought herself something to eat and drink at the cafeteria and walked outside. She went around the school, down a narrow walkway to a square hole in a building.

It was by complete accident that she found this spot. She wandered around aimlessly searching for a place where she could be alone and, before she knew it, she found herself here.

It was perfect for lunch-- no people, no noise. *Great find, if I do say so myself.*

Rio gently sat down on some protruding concrete. She pulled out her phone and opened an instant messaging app to check for notifications.

She tapped on the illustrated cat icon with the name Yui next to it, only to then close the app with a generous swipe and put away her phone.

With a faint sigh she lifted her head up just in time to catch a small moving shadow out in the corner of her eye. *A kitty.* The cat walked with its tail lazily hung, its fur light brown lined with the occasional silver hair.

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty." Rio gestured it over.

The cat listlessly raised its head and looked over to Rio, only to immediately turn around and run.

After watching it fade out of view, Rio opened her stuffed bread and took a bite. The inside was mostly air.

I might as well just bring my own food at this rate. She crammed the rest of it into her mouth, washing it down with a drink.

Just about as she finished her lunch, a quiet plop resounded underfoot. *Rain.* The forecast predicted cloudy weather, yet the clouds had suddenly darkened over.

As Rio idly gazed up at the sky, the plops became louder and louder until it eventually started pouring mere minutes later.

Rain struck concrete, trickling down to Rio's location and forming black stains on her shoes and the hem of her dress.

She backed up against the wall, pulling her knees toward her chest. *Can't get me here.* Rio sat there and waited, watching drops of rain dribble down the walls.

Chapter Three

Yui vs Mina

Back home later that day, Yuuki finally decided to start properly studying for his midterms.

He didn't take his classes all too seriously but he did make sure to score decently well on his midterms. Mostly to set his dad's mind at ease, let him know he was putting in the work.

Ten days 'till midterms. This might be a little rough. I've been slacking recently. Yuuki thought, arranging his notes and school books across the living room table.

"Yuu-ki-e." Just as he started checking what was on the midterm, Mina snuck up from behind, blowing on his neck.

Yuuki's gaze remained fixed on the table. "Don't bother me."

"Bother you? I'm helping."

"Don't help me."

She seemed displeased.

Mina took out an exercise ball, bouncing up and down, up and down to the floor. "Stay still." She grumbled at the inanimate object, drawing a pair of eyes and a mouth onto it with a sharpie. Yuuki continued ignoring her as she decked it in the face, laughing hysterically. "Corkscrew punch it, come on. It looks funny."

"Don't you have midterms coming up soon? Less playing, more studying." She started coughing. "Mina?"

Her grades were in a rather, no, considerably bad spot. She had a lot of lost time to make up for and yet appeared to have no sense of urgency whatsoever.

"I said I'd try making friends. Didn't say a word about no studies."

"Uh-huh. And did you make any?"

"N-Not yet! But I'm working on it, alright?"

"Great. Now just work on your studies like you work on making friends."

"I can't take two orders at once. My skill... your taming level isn't high enough." Mina started speaking nonsense again, trying to worm her way out. She lifted her head as if ending the topic. "But enough about that. What's for dinner tonight?"

"I guess I could go buy us bentos."

“Make it a gyudon bento!”

“Don’t make me walk all the way to the station.”

“Gyudon! Gyudon!”

Gyudon appeared to have quickly grown on her as she boasted about eventually trying all of its different flavors.

Yuuki tried to ignore Mina, but it was downright impossible to concentrate hearing her whisper ’gyudon’ in his ear every ten seconds. Realizing she wasn’t stopping anytime soon, he ended up taking her shopping anyway.

It was already around seven o’ clock by the time they got to the gyudon place-- the perfect time for dinner. “How about we eat here?”

“We’re eating at home.”

Home lover. She couldn’t eat around other people, supposedly.

They got takeout and semi-hurried back home when Mina suddenly stopped in front of a corner shop. “I want dessert.”

“Can’t resist the corner shop, huh.”

“Don’t worry. I have money.”

She apparently received a hefty amount of pocket money after telling their dad he didn’t have to come back home every week; Mina’s ultimate money printing method.

She pushed Yuuki into the shop, where she carefully examined the dessert shelf before finally picking something out. “Can I get candy too?”

“Sure, just be reasonable. And make it quick.”

“Yes!” She exclaimed, adding this and that into the shopping basket which ended up totaling over ten bucks.

Our idea of reasonability appears very different.

After returning home, the two had a late-ish dinner at the kitchen table.

Mina wolfed down her green onion gyudon, pulling a pudding dessert topped with cream and fruits out of the fridge. “Want a bite? Do you? Do you?” She pestered Yuuki as she took her sweet, sweet time finishing it.

Yuuki wanted to just finish his meal and get back to studying. “I’mma go take a bath.” Mina said, only to come running back. “Where’d you put my panties?”

“In your room.”

“But I already looked there, Yukkie.” She continued to make a nuisance out of herself.

Mina came out of the bath in her underwear, covered in steam, holding out a drier. “Dry my hair please.”

And so, he lost more and more time.

Yuuki took a bath himself and, just as he thought he’d finally get some studying done, Mina, laying on the sofa, began blasting the TV. “Mind turning it down? Or better yet, turn it off.”

“Volume master Mina at your service. Volume, lowered!”

“But nothing... never mind that. Are you doing this on purpose?”

“Doing what?” She inquisitively tilted her head.

Having this little self-awareness was a crime in its own right.

If only I could lock myself in my room. Yuuki’s room, or rather his bedroom, had no space for a desk as a massive bed took up most of it.

Mina’s room, on the other hand, did have a desk but it saw next to no use. “Mind if I borrow your room? And, if possible, mind staying away?”

“So you can do what, Yuukie?”

“Study.”

Mina pouted at Yuuki’s curt response but then, as if recalling something, she shot back, “So, what happened to Yui?”

“Huh?”

She pointed at Yuuki’s face, his mouth agape. “Why do you head straight back home from school alone all the time?” She stuck her index in his cheek, poking it.

Yui and Yuuki were passing off as girlfriend and boyfriend to Mina. It also appeared she was under the impression couples spent every second of their lives together.

“Don’t tell me you got dumped. All because you didn’t take action. All but a fleeting dream.”

“We’re just busy getting ready for midterms, is all.”

“He said as the two slowly drifted apart.”

“Studying is important, okay?”

“Well study together then.” She pointed down. Looked like she wanted him to bring Yui over.

“Here? You’ll just get in our way.”

“Oh, come on. I would never.”

“Yes yes, now go study.”

“I will... if you bring Yui.”

“Promise?”

Mina furiously shook her head up and down.

Maybe she'll listen to a third party more, kind of like last time. Although, I'd rather we sort our problems out ourselves. Don't want to inconvenience Yui too much. Yuuki thought as Mina burst out laughing at the TV in the corner of his eye.

***

The following morning.

As Yuuki went through a workbook at his desk, Yui returned from a gossiping circle of girls and said, "Morning." She leaned over, gazing at his desk. "Hard at work, I see." She said with a composed smile on her face.

Where's that confidence coming from? He stared at her. "Something up? Or do you just like what you see?" Yui smirked.

Yuuki begrudgingly decided to tell her about yesterday. "Basically, I think Mina's onto us."

"Hmm. Mmhmm." Yui placed her hand on her chin, groaning.

He wasn't expecting much. *This must be a huge headache, even for the seatmate killer*. He thought.

"I mean, I just have to turn up at your place again, yeah? Easy peasy." Yui flashed an ok symbol, oddly enthusiastic about the whole ordeal, only to immediately follow it up with a frown. "Hmm, though I did promise I'd study with Rio today."

"No worries. A promise is a promise."

"But I have to do it, for Mina. For Mina." She said as she pulled out her phone, fiddling with it.

Is she texting her to cancel their plans? Now I kind of feel bad.

"You promised her first, didn't you? Weren't you two max hearting it?"

"We are, which is why she doesn't mind me flaking on her. Look, she even wrote 'All good!'" Yui said, staring at the screen. It appeared she had already gotten a response back.

Yuuki couldn't help but imagine Rio stomp the ground underneath her, shaking furiously. *But if she says it's all good then who am I to doubt her?*

***

The two headed back to Yuuki's place after school.

As they entered the living room together, Mina hopped out of the sofa with her phone in hand and ran over to them. “Eek! She’s here, Yui’s really here!” She jumped into Yui’s arms, her eyes lighting up.

When did her affection meter get maxed out?

Yuuki shot Yui a somewhat confused glance. “Were you two always like this?”

“You bet. No heart that my natural charm can’t sink.”

“I don’t think that means what you think it means.”

Even Yui appeared slightly startled by the warm welcome, showing mild signs of discomfort.

“What a soft tush you have.”

“Q-Quit it! Mina!”

Either something had spurted this change in behavior, or maybe she just thought Yui would let her get away with it.

Mina fondled Yui’s butt. “Don’t be shy, join in.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

“I *do* mind. Thank you very much.” Yui shot him a ’what do you think you’re doing’ glare.

“Aren’t you two dating?” Mina pointed out with a displeased look on her face.

“We’re not at that tier yet! We’re a wholesome couple!” Yui shooed her off.

Mina pouted, fleeing to Yuuki’s side. He placed his hand on her head, stroking it. “You have your clothes on today. Good girl.”

“Hehe.” She grinned, all satisfied.

While Mina only had shorts and a t-shirt on, she was, in fact, fully clothed. No amount of nagging helped fix her ’habits’ so Yuuki decided to compliment her instead. Must’ve felt great from Mina’s perspective; she’d get showered with praise just for putting on clothes.

“I’ve realized not wearing any underwear provides an even greater sense of liberty.”

“I really wish you hadn’t.” It appeared things weren’t going to be as simple as he thought.

Mina took Yuuki’s and Yui’s hand. “What’re you standing around for? Have a seat!” She said as she dragged them over to the sofa, urging them to sit down.

They did just that while Mina fidgeted about, disappearing into the kitchen for a while, only to bring back drinks; tea from the look of it. The cups were not evenly filled.

She set them on the table. “There you go. Study hard you two.” She said, exiting the living room.

What’s with the motherly attitude? You’re the one that needs to be studying the hardest. But anyway, what is going on? Yuuki just kind of looked over to the living room entrance, crossing gazes with a curious pair of eyes eavesdropping on them.

Mina nodded, raising her fist. “Get ’er, tiger! Go!”

Yesterday she was grumbling how a couple should be more intimate or something along those lines. Mina appeared to have started harboring doubts over the authenticity of their relationship... or was likely just frustrated with the lack of progress. Mina was in full view of Yui, to boot.

Yuuki glanced over to her and, surely enough, saw a wry smile on her face, so he started explaining. “She’s worried you’ll dump me if I don’t do something about it, apparently.”

“M-Mmhmm. How thoughtful. And?”

“She suggested we display more intimacy, so to speak.”

“In-Intimacy? And how would we do that?”

“Hmm, you could try giving me another lap pillow?”

“To make you or her happy?”

“Me.”

The two exchanged looks, an awkward silence hanging in the air.

Yui looked like she was about to add something but she reconsidered, instead clearing her throat and readjusting her posture. *I guess she’s giving me the go-ahead?*

And yet, Yuuki hesitated to just gleefully dive in her lap. “I feel a little embarrassed.”

“W-Wow. You have emotions?”

“Can you not make me sound like some robot in front of my little sister?”

“It does sound like some freaky fetish play when you put it like that.”

Mina fist pumped in the corner of Yuuki’s eye.

Here goes nothing. He placed the side of his head on Yui’s lap, a soft, warm sensation spreading across his cheek. He then buried his face in her thighs, releasing all the tension in his body as a shaky voice came from above.

“Wha-What’s with the pose?”

“I’m trying to really savor all that juicy thigh meat.”

“S-Spoken like a true perv! Which you are!”

“Your lap is the best. Not that I have anything to compare it to.”

“You’re starting to sound more and more like the cheating type.”

“What makes you say that?” He asked, gazing up and shaking his head as Yui faced away.

In the midst of his confusion, Yui began lifting her thighs up and down. “One, two, three.”

“I’m not a dumbbell.”

“Not with that empty head of yours you’re not.” Yuuki lifted his upper body, giving Yui a silent stare. Her head gently tilted, she asked, “Did I touch a nerve?”

“You did.”

“I don’t get you, at all.”

Yuuki averted his gaze just in time to catch Mina furiously shaking her fists in the air.

Yui leaned in with a slightly concerned look on her face, blocking Mina from view. “Look I’m sorry, okay? You still upset?”

“No.”

“That was quick.”

“Do-over, now.”

“Aren’t we forthcoming with our desires?”

Yuuki met Yui’s judging gaze head on. “Just thought I’d shoot my shot. It’s okay if you’re not cool with it, I understand.”

“Don’t get me wrong, if we really were dating I wouldn’t m-min...” Her cheeks lightly flushed, Yui gave Yuuki the puppy dog eyes, blinking.

I don’t know how you can be so embarrassed over such an obvious statement. And if we really were dating, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation to begin with. Yuuki thought as he saw Mina in the corner of his eye, jumping up and down in a fighting pose, urging him to seize the moment.

“Alright alright, I get it.” Yui sidled up to Yuuki, turning toward him.“ Straighten your back out and don’t move.”

Anything else?

As Yuuki did as told, unsure of her intentions, Yui lowered her head, resting it against his shoulder. “Ooh, that’s genius.”

“R-Right?”

In reality, her head hung just slightly above his shoulder. The nape of her neck didn’t seem too happy about it, twitching.

Yuuki looked over to Mina, expecting a satisfied reaction, only to see her pointing her phone in their direction.

“Woah woah woah!” Yui jumped to her feet, straddling over to Mina as she quickly hid her phone behind her back. “You took it. Tell me I’m wrong!”

“No.”

“What do you think you’re doing, missy!”

“Taking a nice picture of the two love birds...”

“Yo-Your midterms are right around the corner! Go study!”

“Weeeeell, you see, the feng shui here is all out of whack.” Yui stood no chance; Mina didn’t take her seriously at all. Yuuki was about to ask if she had lied to him yesterday when she added, “I’ll listen to you, if you can beat me in a game of...”

“A game of what?”

Mina left Yui with a puzzled look on her face as she came back from her room carrying a game console. She plugged it into the TV, launching a game. “Bash Bros.” She said with a controller in hand, pointing at the TV.

Yui smirked. “Oh, you’re on.”

On screen was a player vs player character fighting game.

Mina once forced Yuuki into playing a game of Bash with her, in which she proceeded to completely dumpster him. Despite the cartoony appearance, it had quite a lot of mechanical depth.

“I wouldn’t if I were you. She’s good, real good.”

Yui ignored Yuuki’s warning, sitting down in front of the TV. “Do you seriously think I’d lose to some kiddy like her? Puh-lease.” She licked her lips, talking mad trash.

Yui grabbed a controller, getting a feel for the buttons, the joystick. She seemed ready and skilled.

“I didn’t know you were something of a gamer”

“Why do you think I do the cleaning, the laundry, the cooking? So mom doesn’t... so I can laze around in peace.” She declared.

You laze around at home all the time?

Oblivious to Yuuki’s judging gaze, Yui began selecting her character. “Don’t worry, I’ll go easy on you. At first.”

“Big words coming from a nooby like you.”

“Try not to cry when you inevitably lose, alright?”

The two smack-talked each other as the match finally began. They started out slow, observing one another, engaging in small clashes. Then they got more and more aggressive, jumping and flying all over the place. Their characters violently collided, Mina taking the lead.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

Yui maintained her composure, at first. As Mina’s onslaught continued, huh’s and what’s started flying out. Things were not looking good for her. Then came the tongue clicks followed by a resounding ’ah’ as the letters KO popped up across the screen.

“Let’s go, baby! What was *that*? You good? Feeling alright?”

“I-I’m just not feeling this character right now, okay? Wait till I bust out my main.” Yui switched characters, kicking off round two.

Yui didn’t look Mina’s way even once; her gaze was glued to the screen the entire time. Mina, on the other hand, showed remarkable concentration.

Even a layman like Yuuki could tell Yui was severely outclassed from their character movements, their finger dexterity.

“What was that?! You’re hacking! I know you are!”

“Cry more, nooby.”

Yet another blow out seemed to have finally made Yui snap. Mina, meanwhile, calmly taunted Yui with her character, really rubbing it in.

Come on, don’t rub salt in the wound. He looked over to Yui.

“You’re dead, kid.”

It’s working. It’s really working.

Her already mediocre gameplay only dropped in quality as Yui got served yet another swift loss.

Yui silently picked a different character, requesting an instant rematch. “Stay calm. You got this.” She muttered to herself in between deep breaths before the match started, only to immediately throw a fit once it did “That hit registered?! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Yuuki felt as though he was watching a grade schooler... as though she lacked maturity for a high schooler. “Yui.”

“What?!”

“You’re being obnoxious.”

“Oh yeah?” She karate chopped the side of his shoulder. In the brief moment that she took her hand off the controller, the letters KO popped up on

screen. Yui pointed at him. “Look what you did! Just had to pester me, didn’t you?”

“You’re blaming me?”

“Yuuki, switch.”

“Man, I’m terrible at this game. She’d wipe the floor with me.”

“No, switch with her.”

“What? Why?”

“Just do it!”

Yuuki and Mina switched as ordered. And so, their battle began. Yuuki, still fumbling around with the controls, was, of course, demolished in an instant.

“I won. I won!” She dropped her controller, triumphantly fist pumping with a great big smile on her face.

As she did, Yuuki and Mina, who watched the whole thing unfold, silently exchanged glances

Mina, with the gentlest eyes Yuuki had ever seen her make, gazed into Yui’s face from the side. “I’m sorry, Yui.”

“F-For what?” Yui played dumb as her face visibly twisted, her eyes darting from side to side.

“There, there. You did great.” Yuuki said, stroking her head.

Yui’s shoulders jumped, her face turning pink. She bit down on her lip, shooting Yuuki a frustrated glare. But then Mina, mimicking her brother, started consoling her in a similar fashion. Yui hung her head, falling into silence.

Chapter Four

Habitual Solitary Eater

"And what about this one?"

The following morning, as Yuuki walked into the classroom, he saw none other than the ill-tempered girl from yesterday morning-- Rio.

Notebook in hand, she stood by Yui's desk, answering every one of her questions with a delighted giggle. It appeared Yui was in the middle of utilizing her secret weapon.

Yuuki sat down at his desk and, as payback for yesterday, said, "Hard at work, I see."

"Hmph."

"Hmm?"

"Hmmmph!" She chanted some kind of weird spell, averting her gaze.

Is she still mad about yesterday? What a sore loser. Rio shot him an intense glare, moving in between Yuuki's and Yui's desks as if partitioning the two. *Boy, do they hate my guts.* Yuuki muttered to himself as he transferred the contents of his bag onto his desk. *Might as well get some studying done myself while it's still nice and quiet.* He thought, just as a tiny piece of eraser came flying toward his desk.

Yuuki looked over to his side, only to see Yui poking her head out from behind Rio. "What?"

"Distract the enemy." She said, retreating behind cover.

Yuuki couldn't even give her a piece of his mind as the wall (Rio) standing in between would just stare at him, menacingly.

I could retaliate but I feel like whatever I throw would just come flying back at me.

Rio would remain there until the homeroom bell rang.

***

Lunch break.

Yuuki had bought himself an onigiri and some stuffed bread on his way to school.

As he went to grab the grocery bag out of his backpack, girls started pulling their chairs up to Yui's desk in ones and twos.

A ladies lunch began soon after, and with it, seemingly endless gossip. Even Yuuki wasn't sure if he could endure this all lunch break long.

He gazed out the window, attempting to distance himself from the noise. Sunlight pierced through the rifts in the clouds.

The weather was lovely, the wind nice and refreshing. It almost felt a bit wasteful to spend the whole day cooped up inside.

Might as well eat outside. Have to go down to the first floor to get myself something to drink anyway.

Grocery bag in hand, Yuuki got up from his seat.

After buying himself a bottle from a vending machine by the cafeteria and stuffing it inside his bag, he went outside. It was quite hot in the direct sunlight, even if the temperature itself wasn't that high.

Yuuki looked around, only to find that all the benches in the shade were already taken. *Figures.*

And yet, there was no going back now; Yuuki's desk had likely been encroached upon by one of Yui's tag-alongs.

In search of respite, Yuuki first wandered the courtyard, then the backyard.

He went down a gravel path, passing by the incinerator, then the school staff car parking area, as he looked for somewhere sittable.

No shot anyone comes out all the way out here. He thought, only to find a happy couple sitting on the brick flower bed.

He continued journeying deeper and deeper, down some narrow walkway. He considered turning back as he rounded a corner, when he suddenly sensed a nearby presence.

Yuuki shifted his gaze toward said presence, spotting a girl sitting inside a small niche in a building wall. "Ah." He exclaimed.

The girl lifted her head, surprise plastered on her face as their gazes met. She looked awfully familiar to a certain individual who shot daggers at him earlier that morning.

It can't be her. Why would she be here? Avoiding eye contact as much as possible, Yuuki bowed and tried to casually walk away.

"Hold it!" She exclaimed, physically whipping him around by the shoulders. He was met with a menacing glare and a pink face. With how similar their voices were, she was, without a doubt, none other than Rio Hanashiro herself. "Y-You!"

"Me?"

Rio dropped her gaze for a second before resuming her scheduled glare. “You just gave me the ’omg I can’t believe this loser is eating out here all by herself’ eyes!”

“No I didn’t?”

“Then what’s with the ’I’ll pretend I didn’t see that’ reaction!”

“I’m not a very reactive person.”

“That’s not the issue here!”

In sharp contrast to Yuuki’s usual nonchalant self, Rio had completely lost it, her hair disheveled, her cool image nowhere to be seen.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Wha-What’re you doing here?”

“Looking for a place to eat.”

“B-By yourself?”

“Do you see anyone else apart from me?”

Tension left her face in relief. “I-I see. We’re one and the same, you and I! Yes, one and the same! Ahahahahaha!” Rio burst out into a fit of maniacal laughter like some villainess.

That’s a little disturbing. He thought, when she suddenly snapped back to normal.

“Laugh, come on. Isn’t it hilarious?”

“I’m not your underling. It really isn’t that hilarious either.” Yuuki replied.

Rio slumped her shoulders, her energy completely depleted. *She doesn’t seem very mentally stable either.*

Setting Rio aside for a moment, Yuuki took in his surroundings.

The spot was in the shade, a cool breeze blew past every now and then, and, above all, it was quiet.

Concrete protruded right where Rio just was, making it perfectly sittable. Beside it sat a handbag and a half-empty bento box. Yuuki sat down and found it quite nice.

“What do you think you’re doing? I don’t remember giving you permission to sit there.” Rio gazed down at Yuuki, her arms crossed. It appeared solitary eaters were quite territorial.

Yuuki, however, had zero intention to fight. “Alrighty then.” He got up to leave.

“W-Well, I might consider it if you ask nicely.”

“It’s fine. Wouldn’t want to be a bother; You seem angry enough already.”

“A-Angry? I’m not angry! What makes you think I’m angry!?”

“You even sound angry.”

Rio made a weird face, like she was trying to put on a smile but failed miserably. “Just do as I say and I’ll give you an octopus sausage.” She said in a commanding tone.

“Yipee.” Yuuki sat back down on the concrete as told.

Rio sat down beside him, grabbing the almost empty bento box and holding it out. Yuuki fished out the sole surviving octopus sausage, tossing it in his mouth.

Rio smirked as she watched him enjoy it. “Heh, that makes us birds of a feather. Partners in crime, if you will. Disrespect me again and I’ll tell

everyone you came here to eat by yourself like the loner you are."

"So?"

How is that supposed to hurt me? If anything people'll think you're the weirdo for going around telling everyone that. Yuuki thought.

"What if I told Yui you ate lunch alone?"

"Y-You wouldn't dare! How cowardly..." Rio glared at him like a captured female soldier.

I just thought I'd ask Yui to join you. Actually, why doesn't she just ask her directly? Although, to be fair, it definitely isn't easy to join a pre-existing friend group. She seems to enjoy eating alone either way, so who am I to interfere? I'm just happy I found a cool new spot.

"Okay, Rio, as thanks I'll--"

"Stop right there. Who let you call me Rio?"

"Yui calls you that."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Yuuki thought she wouldn't mind as they weren't exactly strangers anymore.

"Ok, what should I call you then?"

"H-How should I know? Figure it out yourself."

That doesn't help.

After a bit, she added, "Well, I guess you could always just call me by my last name, as is standard."

"You know the mass-produced MS Leo? The one that gets stronger when the protagonist pilots it?"

"No. What about it?"

Yuuki tried to lighten the mood, only to get the "call me that and you're dead" eyes. "Rio it is." Her face stiffened as if she wasn't quite pleased.

But she's all smiles around Yui. Yuuki thought, struck by a sudden flash of brilliance as he imagined them together.

"That reminds me. I have a cute picture of Yui."

"Eh?"

He took out his phone, pulling up a cool picture of Yui she had sent him over Lime some time ago. Yuuki had it saved as he liked it quite a lot.

"What really makes this picture is the smile, that smug, detestable smile. You should give it a try yourself sometimes."

"Where is this coming from all of a sudden?"

"Everyone says the way you smile around Yui is cute."

“H-Huh? Who is this everyone and why don’t they mind their own... How does anyone expect me to smile when I’m not having fun? Also, why do you have that picture?”

“Because she sent it to me? Actually, let me send it to you. Lime’s good?”

“L-Lime? Does that mean I have to add you to my friendlist?”

“How else would I send it?”

Why do you ask the obvious?

Rio’s gaze began to wander.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

“F-Fine, since you want it so bad.”

She reluctantly pulled out her phone, taking seemingly forever to get ready. Her hands, shaking as if she was about to perform open-heart surgery, halted progress.

“No, tap that.”

“I-I know! I just forgot for a second.”

She’s so not used to this. Yuuki chuckled on the inside, despite fumbling just as much when he and Yui exchanged ID’s.

Eventually, the two managed to successfully friend one another.

“Who uses their full name? Newbie alert.”

“R I O. Pff.”

“Wh-What’s so funny? It’s completely normal! Whatever, just send it already!”

“On second thought, maybe I should ask for permission first.”

“P-Permission? N-No, you’re supposed to be discreet with these things...”

He ignored Rio’s rapid-fire mumbling, hitting Yui up. *“Mind if I send Rio that picture of yours from before?*”

He wasn’t expecting a quick response regardless, only to get one back almost immediately. *“Noooooo way! I’ll kill you if you do! Delete it right now!*”

“She said no way.”

“Wh-What? Why would she...”

“What a cheapskate, am I right?”

Why not just give her the picture? You sent it to me without a care.

Rio stood there with her mouth partly open, her soul seemingly having left her body. Yuuki pulled out the bottle from his grocery bag and started drinking from it.

As he did, he noticed a half-empty bottle sitting next to Rio; The same dark-colored carbonated beverage as the one he was holding.

"Woah."

"Wh-What?"

"Look, they're the same. You like Dr Peppy too?"

Rio didn't respond, hastily moving the bottle out of view, over to the other side. She remained on high alert while Yuuki grabbed an onigiri from his bag, unwrapping and eating it.

As she watched him chew on it, she felt the need to air her grievances.

"You're just munching away without a second thought. Do you even realize the situation you're in?"

"A happy one. It's delicious."

"Happy? You're happy to have your lunch in a place like this?"

"Quite." It was heaven compared to the never-ending stream of gossip. It was also pleasantly warm, the occasional light breeze refreshing. "A quick nap here after a nice lunch would be the best."

"I'll steal your wallet while you're asleep. See how you like it then."

"Now why would you say that?"

"Because you're not making any sense. You're telling me you're somehow content with all of this? I can't stand deceptive liars like you."

Despite her bold assertions, Yuuki wasn't lying nor did he have any intention of deceiving her. "Then what're you doing here? Go grab lunch with someone, like your shoe locker friends."

"Friends? Those looked like *friends* to you? They're just a bunch of morons who like to mock me, making me out to be some exaggerated character stereotype." Rio bit down on her lip.

It appeared Keitarou and Sonada's story wasn't entirely correct.

"Aren't you? Seatmate breaker."

"Seat what? Please don't give me weird nicknames." Rio finished off her last remaining tamagoyaki roll. "It's why I don't join the disciplinary committee or the student council anymore." She said, putting away her bento box. "I still hate childish, immature individuals but anything I say will only get me laughed at, so I just ignore them."

"Mmhmm. And that's why you don't have any friends?"

"Wh-Where did you get that from? Also, I'll have you know I have a b-b-best friend." She said, stumbling over her words like she didn't even believe them herself.

Naturally, only one person came to mind. “Yui, you mean?”

“Y-Yes. What about it?”

Someone she called her ’best friend’ had never brought Rio’s name up even a single time. Not to mention that Yuuki, her seatmate, hadn’t seen Rio once.

“For best friends, you sure don’t hang out a lot. Probably don’t even walk back home together.”

“O-Our schedules just don’t align that well...”

Yuuki, of course, wasn’t buying any of it. Rio, perhaps realizing this, let her gaze drop. She stared at the ground, her face twisting.

After being silent for some time, she lifted her head suddenly, her shoulders shaking. “T-That’s right! I’m nothing but a tool! Just one of the many in her massive circle of friends! She recently flaked on me too. We had a group study planned...”

She held a grudge after all. Yuuki refrained from telling her it was partly his fault. Yui, on the other hand, was all like ’I’m sure she won’t mind me flaking on her.’

“Yui certainly has her issues, to put it lightly. No reason to obsess--”

“D-Don’t talk about Yui like that! She’s different from the rest! Don’t get me wrong, I’d like to spend more time with her: walking back home together, texting each other all night, hanging out on the weekends...”

“Then do it.”

“Listen! She’s the initiator and I’m the one that gives in after some convincing! I can’t just ask her to come hang out!”

“Pff.”

“What’s so funny?!”

“Sorry, I just tried imagining it.”

Repeat what you just said and I’m sure Yui would gladly hang out with you. The way you said it was way too cute.

Rio, meanwhile, was furious and ready to pounce on him at any moment.

“You’re smart, you’re pretty yet so... twisted.”

“What difference does it make? Yui’s prettier, livelier, kinder, cheerier, sunnier, loved by all...”

“I think you’re glorifying her.”

Yui really wasn’t all that beloved.

Earlier, someone from her friend group told her to shut up because she was, apparently, monopolizing the conversation.

She also happened to be a sore loser much like a grade schooler, still not having gotten over yesterday's loss.

"No I'm not. Actually, it's a mystery to me why Yui even bothers paying attention to a worthless nobody like you." She suddenly began smack-talking Yuuki, raising Yui up on the most grandiose of pedestals.

The seatmate killer's brainwashing appeared to be the culprit.

I can't let her get away with snatching her former seatmate's heart just for the fun of it, only to then break it. Yui has to take responsibility and atone for her crimes.

"Okay, so basically you want to get closer to Yui but can't gather up the courage to ask her out yourself. Alright then, I'll ask her out tomorrow or the day after for you."

"Eh?" The proposal seemed to have caught Rio off guard as her eyes widened, with a shaky voice she continued. "I-I appreciate it but why... why would you do that for me?"

"There are no bad Dr Peppy enjoyers."

"H-Huh? What kind of reasoning is that? Actually... won't I come off as desperate?"

"I know, I know, that's why I won't bring up your name. Basically, what we do is..." Yuuki lowered his voice, even though there was no one around to hear them.

Rio, her cheeks lightly flushed presumably with excitement, leaned forward on her knees and brought her ear to Yuuki's mouth.

***

After having finished eating lunch with Rio, Yuuki made it back to class just before the first bell.

Yui's orbiters had conveniently dispersed. She shot Yuuki a quick glance as he sat down at his desk before returning her focus to what appeared to be a notepad in front of her.

Yuuki came to the realization that they hadn't really talked at all today.

He wasn't even avoiding her, she was actually the one avoiding him, or rather, she wasn't initiating conversation.

On top of that she exuded this unapproachable aura, which Yuuki simply ignored as he had business to discuss.

"Yui, you free this weekend?"

Her shoulders jumped. She slowly turned her head toward him. “And what if I am?”

“I thought maybe we could meet up again.”

Yui did a double take. “Is this about Mina?”

“No, I just want to hang out with you.”

“Honn...” She started making weird noises, her mouth open as she stroked her chin.

Is she having spasms again?

As Yuuki gazed at her, Yui put on her signature smirk as a distraction. “With me? Oh, you want to go on another date with me? Well, well, well.”

“A simple yes or no, please.”

“Let me savor the moment.”

Yui seemed feisty. Certainly nothing out of the norm for her, perhaps, but Yuuki had a sneaking suspicion he needed to confirm. “You seem in a bad mood today. Still mad about yesterday’s loss?”

“M-Me? Mad over some silly little game? Do I look like a k-kid to you?!”

“Where are the angry vibes coming from then?”

Yui pursed her lips, muttering, “Maybe from you two treating me like a child?”

“Sorry?”

“I’m not angry! We’re... midterm rivals, yes, midterm rivals! Team RiYui’s going to whoop your ass two vs one.”

That’s like ganging up on someone solo fighting bots-- borderline, nay, actual cheating. What a sick mind. Although, that’s why it’s worth fixing.

“But okay, if you insist. Saturday? Sunday? What time? What place?”

“Weren’t we rivals? And shouldn’t you be studying with Rio?”

“Umm, well, I can always study later, it’s whatever. Rivals on weekdays only.”

Study later? When? After midterms are over?

Yui leaned in, her voice growing livelier by the minute. This made Yuuki feel uneasy, as if she was plotting something.

“Hmm, how about you come to my place?”

“Your place it is, then.”

“How’s the afternoon sound? I’m not much of a morning person.”

“I get sleepy in the afternoon... Eh, fine. I’ll swing by earlier and hang out with Mina.”

Yui went along with whatever he proposed. *Does she not have any plans? Though, I guess that only makes my life easier.*

"Yuuki asking me out. Is Ragnarök finally upon us?"

"Midterms would be the last of our concerns, if that were the case."

"Also, what was that whole deal with Rio and the picture?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? Delete that picture already, seriously." Yui narrowed her eyes, suspiciously. "You better not be up to something." She started nagging.

Actually, now that I really, really think about it, I should've at least waited for midterms to finish before doing this. Yuuki already began regretting his decision.

Chapter Five

Yuuki's Master Plan

"Yukkie!"

"Brother!"

"Yu-kki-e!"

"Ra Muuuuuu!"

Yuuki awoke to an intense ultrasonic wave barrage.

He pried his eyes open and saw Mina standing imposingly at his bedside, loudspeaker in hand.

"Wakey wakey, sleepyhead!"

"It's Sunday, Mina. School's out."

"It's Saturday, hello? Get up, come on, move it! Yue's here!"

"Yue?"

Yui's distant Chinese relative? Still sleepy-eyed, Yuuki reluctantly got out of bed.

Mina dragged him to the living room where he was approached by an unfamiliar silhouette, peering into his face.

"Look who's finally awake. Making your little sister get you out of bed. How low."

"We're not interested in your Chinese herbs. Off you go now."

"What?"

"That's it." Mina raised her loudspeaker. Yuuki, having had enough ultrasonic waves for one day, covered his ears. She got on her tippy toes, pushing it right up to his ear, and yelled, "Go get dressed already you slob!"

Yui giggled. "Cute pajamas you got there, Yuuki."

Being the subject of such harassment was not how Yuuki envisioned his morning.

"Lay off."

"He just clicked his tongue at us."

"Yukkie can get a little grumpy when he's sleepy."

"A little? Yuuki, yoo-hoo, it's me, your beloved girlfriend."

"My what? Are you sleepwalking?"

"The only sleepwalker here is you." Yui leaned in and whispered, "Moron, Mina's watching!" Her hair swayed, a sweet aroma tickling his nose.

“Oh, it’s you, Yui. Morning.”

“You figure that out just now?”

“Come here, let me give you a hug.”

“No thanks, perv.” Yui took two steps back as he spread his arms out.

A smaller figure leapt into Yuuki’s chest instead. “Don’t mind if I do!” He wrapped his arms around Mina’s back, squeezing the life out of her.

“I knew it was a trap... alright, enough already!” Yui barged in, tearing his prey away. “What’s wrong with you? Bear hugging your sister first thing in the morning.”

As she held Mina up, her eyes suddenly lit up. “Yui, my love!” Mina whipped around. She grabbed her butt, rubbing her cheeks against Yui’s.

“M-Mina! Get off!”

“Mission complete.”

“Who hired you to do this and how much are they paying you?!” Yui pinched Mina’s cheeks, stretching them out.

Yuuki watched, his tired eyes trying to process what was happening.

“My, my, my. Your hair’s a complete mess, Yuuki.”

“Fix it for me.”

“Do it yourself.”

Mina immediately went and fetched a comb, handing it to Yui.

She froze up after having just grabbed it purely out of instinct. Perhaps overwhelmed by Mina’s anticipating gaze, she hesitantly started combing Yuuki’s hair.

“O-Oh alright. B-But just this once!”

“Ouch, watch it! Be gentle.”

“I’d watch my tone if I were you.”

As she lowered her voice to a growl, Mina turned her phone toward them from behind. Yui, seemingly sensing a disturbance in the force, whipped around and went after her.

“Not this again, Mina!”

“My pièce de résistance.”

“Hand it over!’

As he watched Yui chase Mina down, Yuuki hazily recalled the moments before going to bed.

After Mina finally fell asleep he studied late into the night and, next thing he knew, he found himself here.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot about my master pla... my promise to Rio.

Yuuki, having finally returned to his senses, turned to Yui, whose hair was quite disheveled after tussling with Mina, and said,

"Oh yeah, I called you over, didn't I. Morning brain, sorry."

"That's right, apologize. Apologize more, Doraemon style."

"My apologeese."

"Your what now?"

It was getting close to eleven. Time passed faster than expected.

Yuuki left the living room, leaving the two who were still at each other's throats. He washed up in the bathroom, then returned to his room to get dressed.

When he came back to the living room, he could hear Yui and Mina squawking in front of the TV.

"Let me do it!"

"No, it's my turn!"

Yuuki, for a second, thought the two were playing Bash again, only to find that they were actually shari... fighting over the controller while playing a single player game.

Yui was putting on an elderly sister act at first but it quickly crumbled; The end result of two younger sister types butting heads.

"You fell in the same spot again! You suck, Yui!"

"I pressed the jump button; I know I did! This mustachioed geezer has a rebellious streak!"

That's one way of putting it. Yuuki thought to himself as he opened the fridge, deciding it was brunch time.

He felt like eggs ham and toast, but they were out of eggs.

Yuuki figured he'd make a jam sandwich instead, only to find that the jar of strawberry jam, which was at least half full yesterday morning, was nearly empty. Mina's doing, in all likelihood.

The fact that there was just a teeny tiny bit left added insult to injury.

Ham and bread it is. Tired of dealing with his dwindling list of options, he took some thinly sliced ham from the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Hold it!" Yui came over, grabbing her handbag from the corner of the sofa. "A little early for lunch but that's fine."

What lunch? There's nothing decent to choose from. He thought as Yui busted out a bento and a large tupperware from her handbag, placing them on the table.

“Ta-da! Bento!” She announced, spreading her hands dramatically.

The word ’bento’ appeared to have reached Mina’s ears as she immediately dropped her game and came running. “Beeeentoooooo!”

“Don’t think I forgot about you, Mina.” Yui took both the lids off, unveiling the contents within. Mina jumped out of her seat, staring into the bento. She pointed, her eyes wide open. “Are those octopus sausages I’m seeing? Y’all still alive?”

“They’re skewered, Mina.”

“Come on, don’t be like that. It’s been a while since we’ve last had these.”

“Uhh, sure has.”

“No... you ate octopus sausages without me, didn’t you!”

“Maybe I did? I’m old enough to make them myself, if I wanted to.”

“That’s not important right now!” Mina shoved Yuuki to the side, bringing her face right up to the bento. “Tamagoyakiiiii! Karaageeeee!” She squealed seeing it jam-packed with sides.

Yui stood behind Mina, giggling. “Don’t expect much. Went for quantity over quality.”

“What’re you talking about? It looks better than Yukkie’s cooking!”

Traitor... not that I disagree.

The bento contained three different sides, while the tupperware was lined with neat rows of cylindrical, nori-wrapped rice balls.

It certainly lacked in terms of side variety compared to the bento Yuuki received, but preparing this much food must’ve taken quite a while, nonetheless.

Yuuki gazed up at Yui, expressing his gratitude. “Thanks, Yui. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, I just figured I’d give you a break from cooking each and every day.” She scratched her head, an awkward smile on her face. The corners of Yuuki’s mouth turned up slightly at that.

As they awkwardly stared at each other, Mina began tugging on Yui’s arm. “May I dig in? May I?”

“Uhh, sure. Go ahead.”

Mina cheered as she gleefully took one of the octopus sausages she so desperately longed for and tossed it into her mouth.

Yuuki put away the bread, grabbing himself a rice ball instead.

“Mmm, delish!”

“Please be quiet at the dinner table, Mina.”

“Yukkie, shouldn’t you be feeding Yui?”

“Why should I?”

“What do you mean why? You’re dating!”

According to Mina’s date theory, couples were apparently required to feed one another.

Right, we’re supposed to be dating. Yuuki recalled, grabbing an octopus sausage and bringing it up to Yui’s mouth.

“Say aah.” She froze up, throwing him a confused look. Yuuki wiggled it, yet she showed no sign of biting on the sausage. “What’s up?”

“You’re... formidable.”

“Where did that come from?”

“Maybe try, I don’t know, hesitating a little?” She said, her face a weird mixture of awkward and dumbfounded.

Yuuki fed, or rather, was forced to feed Mina all the time, so he didn’t really think much of it, or at least that’s what he thought.

“I feed Mina all the time.”

“That’s not the... all the time?”

“Yukkie, our bloodline is tainted!”

Mina, having said something outlandish out of the blue like that, skewered a piece of tamagoyaki and a piece of karaage onto a single toothpick and started gnawing on it.

Yui appeared to have been conscious of Mina’s looks as she took the opportunity to bite down on the sausage.

“Good girl. Proud of you.”

“Can you not make it sound like I’m some kind of zoo animal?” Yui averted her gaze while chewing on her food.

As she did, Mina stuck her neck out, getting a nice look at Yui’s face. “Is it good? Is it?”

“I-It is.”

“The food is now delicious, all thanks to the power of love! Way to go, Yukkie!”

You’re making it sound like it wasn’t already delicious to begin with.

Yui, unsurprisingly enough, made a sour face, mumbling, “Saying yes to that question kind of feels like...”

“Like tooting your own horn?”

“Nothing wrong with stating the truth!” Yui puffed her chest out.

Mina tapped her on the shoulder, continuing the teasing. “Now it’s your turn! Brace yourself, Yukkie!”

“Try me.”

“Why does it feel like I’m being bullied?”

“Don’t worry, I’m up next!”

Mina said, taking an onigiri in either hand.

The “hand feeding extravaganza” raged on, cleaning out Yui’s bento before long.

Yuuki looked at the clock, Mina’s face of pure bliss visible in the corner of his eye. “We should get going now.” He urged Yui, who had just finished putting away the bento.

“Where are you going?”

“The library. To study.”

“Good luck.”

Mina did a brisk U-turn, heading toward the living room to bask in the comfort of the TV and sofa.

Yuuki told her they’d be going out in advance and yet he couldn’t help but feel a little anxious leaving her home alone.

“Bye bye Mina. Till next time.”

“Aye! Come back any time!”

“Don’t forget to study.”

“You can count on me!” She gave a thumbs up, remote in hand.

Movies. She’s going to laze around and watch movies. Mina begged dad into getting a streaming service subscription when he last came home.

While Yuuki would’ve loved to have a word with her, he had a master plan to... places to be.

With no time to lose, the two took their leave.

The second they left the house, as they walked down the exterior apartment hallway, Yui, stone-faced, grumbled, “The library? You didn’t tell me we were going to the library.”

She made it sound like going there was the most unbelievable thing ever when midterms were approaching.

“We aren’t. I just wanted Mina to think that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Her insisting on coming along could potentially ruin everything.

Yuuki told Yui their destination was a secret as they left the apartment. He walked down an alleyway, Yui right by his side, following along with a spring in her step.

"Where are you taking me? No wait, don't tell me. It's a surprise, isn't it?"

"Ieon's the best."

"Not to be confused with Ideon."

They approached a corner leading into the main street, a lady in a white, floral pattern dress passing them by. The white contrasted beautifully against her loose black hair and slender limbs. She had model-like proportions, her aura so powerful she drew eyes merely by existing. No man could possibly resist such a tempting sight, and Yuuki was no exception.

As he gazed at her legs, Yui extended her arm, blocking his view with a splayed hand. "Watch where you're looking."

Yuuki sensed the approach of her signature face grab maneuver, something he considered entirely undeserved, but it was interrupted by the sound of an awfully familiar voice.

"Yui, fancy meeting you here."

As light returned to his eyes, Yuuki saw Yui and the dress-wearing lady —Rio-- exchanging looks. One was bewildered while the other smiled awkwardly.

"Rio?"

"Wh-What a coincidence, am I right?"

To Yuuki, this was anything but a coincidence as he and Rio had planned for them to run into one another.

They'd pass it off as a coincidence and have her join along for the fun. Such was the... not so master plan.

Rio's transformation caught Yuuki off guard nonetheless. Her eyes were brighter, her lips slightly redder than normal. She looked the part of a model, only for her shaky voice, wandering gaze and general restlessness to ruin the whole aloof beaut aesthetic.

Terrible acting, though I guess not everyone can be a superstar like Yui.

"What're you doing here?"

"I, erm..." Rio looked over to Yuuki, her eyes pleading for help.

Talk about a letdown. He thought Rio, of all people, would've had a plan.

Yuuki, of course, had no plan either, so he gave her the “you’re on your own” eyes.

After darting her eyes back and forth a bit, she, for whatever reason, pointed to a corner shop. “I-I--”

“Ice cream?”

“No, err–”

“Erbazzone?”

Seeing that Rio wasn’t forming a coherent sentence anytime soon, Yuuki came to the rescue.

“You look absolutely stunning. I could barely recognize you.” Rio, uncharacteristically enough, shyly hung her head. Yuuki, however, meant every word. “Clothes make all the difference, huh.” Yuuki said as he examined her from head to toe. Yui’s face poked in and out of the corner of his eyes. “What?”

Yui gently lifted the edges of her skirt. “What do you see?”

“Nothing much.”

“Try again.”

Yui wore a blue, patterned skirt and a white, see-through thin cardigan. Unlike Yuuki, she wore different clothes every time. *Ah, I see.*

“Yes yes, you look cute too.”

“Too late. You had a thousand chances and you blew them all.”

Yuuki got into a bit of a quarrel with Yui.

While they were at it, he looked over to Rio. She stood there in silence with her head hung, showing no sign of joining the conversation. Yuuki followed her gaze only to discover her staring at some random rock on the ground.

He immediately turned her way, deciding it was time to intervene. “Care to join us, Rio?”

“Beh?” Yui made a weird noise with her mouth, twisting her head toward him.

She seemed quite shocked, though Yuuki was the one truly taken aback by her reaction. He thought she’d be all ecstatic, begging Rio to join them with nothing but excitement in her voice.

“Beh? You’re friends, aren’t you?”

“Well yes, but...”

“So it’s a no.”

“D-Don’t put words in my mouth!”

What's with the hesitation then?

As the two bickered, Rio's face began turning pale, her eyes wandering back and forth.

Yui, seemingly having noticed this herself, hastily took her hand and said, "W-Why would I be against your joining? We're besties, aren't we?" Yui cupped said hand, shaking it up and down. Rio's face regained color, blushing pinker and pinker by the second.

"Forget this bozo. Let's go, just you and me."

Something must've rubbed Yui the wrong way. Despite her sunny disposition, her tone was a tad harsh.

Let's go? Go where exactly?

Their destination was a secret, which is to say, Yuuki left all the planning to Rio. Either way, them going without him still meant his master plan was a success.

"Alright, off I go the--"

"Hold it! Didn't you say you'd take me somewhere secret?"

"I didn't really have anything specific in mind. Sorry."

"You what?" Yui froze, her mouth agape.

Yuuki felt something not unlike a murderous aura emanating off of her, so he quickly threw the ball over to Rio's court. "Where were you headed, Rio?"

"I, erm, I thought I'd study for midterms at the library."

Lie turned to truth. Yui flashed a "you can't be serious" face. *At least try to hide it a little.*

Rio appeared to have picked up on this as well. "So-Something wrong, Yui?"

"I, uhh, don't have my school stuff... with me."

"G-Good! Wouldn't want to waste a precious weekend studying!" Rio said as though midterms weren't literally next week. She raised her first in the air, desperately trying to stay upbeat. "Screw studying, today we're kicking it." She said in a shrill voice. "You heard me, kicking it!"

Rio was trying to balance out Yui's vibes or something because her character was completely out of whack. Normally she would've scolded Yui for not taking her studies seriously.

Yui, however, seemed pleased by this turn of events, nodding. "Us hanging out for the first time, huh. Feels a little surreal, doesn't it?" Yui off-handedly gave away the truth. "So, where we heading?"

“W-We’re heading to...” Rio looked over to Yuuki once more as she failed to finish her sentence.

Having never really hung out with his classmates on the weekends, Yuuki didn’t know how to “kick it”. This, in turn, made him less willing to go out--a downward spiral Rio was likely very much familiar with. Yuuki gave her the “don’t look at me” eyes.

Rio carefully monitored Yui’s reaction as she straightened her back and timidly uttered, “To the ar-ar...”

“Ararar?”

“Arcade... maybe?”

***

Following Rio’s suggestion, the trio set out to the arcade near the station.

Yui bestowed upon Yuuki “the honor of tagging behind”, so while she and Rio walked shoulder to shoulder, he followed closely behind, in true stalker fashion.

Yuuki saw no reason to complain. The objective was for those two to have a good time, after all. The problem was that they drew so many eyes, he was afraid he’d actually get labeled as a stalker. It felt like every guy snuck in a passing glance or two.

“I still can’t believe I heard the word ‘arcade’ come out of your mouth.”

“R-Really?”

“You don’t seem like the arcade going type, is all.”

Yuuki listened in on their conversation, his ears pricked. He wanted to figure out why there was this weird metaphorical distance between the two.

At first Yui would ask questions like “what did you have for breakfast” or “where’d you get those clothes” which Rio would answer but then they just... stopped.

Yuuki was under the impression that women could blabber on and on and on without an end in sight, and yet there it was, pure silence.

Maybe I should get the ball rolling again.

He recalled the anime movie Mina had roped him into watching yesterday afternoon.

“‘Silence, boy!’ or ‘You’re… beautiful.’ Which quote do you think is more memorable?”

Yui shot him a quick glance before turning back just as quickly, as if telling him to zip it.

He then started hearing bits and pieces of conversation again, Yui doing most of the talking while Rio just kind of listened.

Eventually, awkward step after awkward step, they made it to ekimae-dori. The pedestrian traffic instantly shot up and so did the number of shops.

On their way to the arcade, Yuuki saw a video game demo playing.

In a second attempt at getting the ball rolling, he pointed at the monitor. “Look, it’s the game you’re so good at.” The game on screen just happened to be the one Yui got ow... played the other day. She shot Yuuki a glare, then proceeded to ignore him. “Look, it’s the game you love so much.” He rephrased, only to be shot an even nastier glare and, once again, ignored. It was as if she wanted to avoid any mention of the incident.

She’s still not over it.

“The game Yui loves so much...” Rio, however, appeared to show interest, abruptly stopping to gaze at the monitor.

Yui begrudgingly halted her stride and, as if to divert the topic, said, “You don’t strike me as much of a gamer, Rio.”

“I-I don’t really mind video games but they’re just that-- games.”

“Get a load of Ms. Cool over here.”

Why are we putting on airs, just say you want to play together or something.

Yui urged her on, ending the topic just like that.

As they came upon a building with a bookshop further down ekimae-dori, Yui stopped. “Ah, almost forgot.” She said. “Mind if I drop by here?”

“Not at all, go ahead.”

Seeing Rio nod, Yui rushed headfirst into the building. She immediately went up the elevator by the entrance, to the second floor comic book corner.

Yui then took out a manga from a neat stack right in front of the entrance. It was a relatively popular shounen series that had an anime adaption. Even Yuuki knew about it.

“New volume’s out, huh. You a fan?”

“’Course. Fades are the cutest.”

“How... basic.”

“Silence, cool guy who turned out to be a ghoul guy.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ohoho.” Yui laughed, holding her palm below her mouth. She then turned toward Rio, who was staring at the manga stack. “Rio you... don’t seem like much of a manga person, either. Novel reader, maybe.”

“W-Well, manga are for children.”

Say you’d like to try reading one, come on.

Yuuki couldn’t take it anymore, so he whispered, “Tell her you’d like to try reading one.”

“Re-Reading? I, err...”

As she struggled to get an answer out, Yui started to get suspicious. “What are you two whispering about, hmm?”

“Just translating for Rio.”

“Mm-hmm. Can’t decipher untranslated Yui-nese?”

More like I’m trying to translate Rio-nese into something more honest.

Though Yui-nese would’ve definitely benefited from a translation. God knows it would’ve made Yuuki’s life a whole lot easier.

“I also see you’ve taken to calling her Rio. How nice. How very, very nice.” Yui gave each of them a narrow-eyed look.

Rio awkwardly drifted her gaze for a bit, only to shoot an accusatory glare Yuuki’s way. For whatever reason, he was made out to be the bad guy.

Yui paid for her stuff and left the bookshop. She became even less talkative, leading to another reign of silence.

Surely but awkwardly, they arrived at the arcade.

It was one of the larger arcades in the area, its building two stories tall.

Yuuki never really came here by himself but Keitarou’d bring up quite often. It was a rather popular spot among students.

They were bombarded with noise from all sides the second they set foot inside: bassy game tracks, sound effects, coins clinking.

Rio, the suggestor, darted her eyes about all suspect like. She didn’t seem very accustomed to the environment, yet she took charge regardless, staggering forth. Yuuki and Yui followed.

“It’s been too long.” Yui looked around, excitement in her voice. She appeared to have eased up a little, her face softening, her gait light.

“Ah.” Rio, leading with a serious look on her face meanwhile, abruptly stopped.

Following her gaze revealed a couple of picture booths. This was Rio’s chance to get her picture taken with Yui.

Knowing Yui, she'll definitely be like "Let's go take our picture together, Rio. What's that? You want to join us too, Yuuki? Oh, alright." Yuuki thought, asking, "Yui, how would you like to--"

"Not interested. Nope."

Yet all he got was a cold response.

Yuuki had recently started to notice that Yui was, in fact, not like your typical high school girl. She had the outward appearance of one, but gave off different vibes.

"Why not?"

"Why would I pay money for something I can do for free with my phone? It's four bucks, Yuuki. Four bucks. That's a whole manga volume."

"Thus proclaimed the selfie master."

"Did you delete it?"

"No."

"Do it. Right now."

"I can't. It's impossible."

"You say that like it's some kind of quest item." Yui complained, initiating some weird staring contest. Noticing Yuuki wasn't about to give an inch, she abruptly tilted her head, smirking in signature Yui fashion. "I see, I see. Love that cute picture of me too much to delete it, hmm?"

"Oh yeah. In fact, let me set it as my wallpaper."

"Anything but that please I beg you."

1-0.

Yui, presumably wanting nothing to do with the topic anymore, did a one-eighty and walked off. Rio watched as she did with a strained face.

"You could've backed me up, you know."

"Wh-Who says I want to take a picture with her?! I... I don't."

You do, I know you do, so why are you acting like this?

It was likely an issue of Yui building a certain image of Rio in her head over the course of their friendship.

"Sh-Shut up, okay? Watch my back." She said as if going to rough someone up.

Rio balled her fists and lifted her head high, straddling after Yui. Yuuki followed her, turning up at the claw machine section.

Yui gazed inside one of the machines, her body pressed against its glass casing. She waved them over, with a smile.

They went up to the machine and peered inside, discovering a couple of palm sized plushies.

Yui pointed at the protruding jaw panda plush toy. “Isn’t he cute?”

“He is?”

“Uhh, yeah? Notice the raw sockability of that jaw.”

Setting aside whatever “sockability” was supposed to mean, Yuuki remembered seeing that plush before.

Mina had won a similar looking keychain from a vending machine at a nearby supermarket. She refused to give up until the panda dropped.

Mina also wanted the plush but she didn’t really like the arcade, stating it had too many monsters.

“Mina loves that thing.”

“That so? Guess I may as well bring her back a souvenir.”

“Can you?”

“Watch my god hand in action, son.” Yui licked her lips, inserting a dollar into the machine.

Willing to shell out cash for a claw machine but not a picture?

Yui bent over, determining the plushie’s exact location with an exaggerated gesture, and began operating the lever.

She then pushed the button next to it. The claw slowly lowered onto its target, grabbing it... or so it seemed, only for the claw to gently glide across its surface, grabbing air.

“Quite the soft touch you have there, god hand”

“Did you see that?! It went right through!”

Maybe you’re just bad at this, too.

Yui wasn’t a claw game expert by any means, but she did insert two more dollars and lost all the same.

Yuuki looked at her as the claw retracted, Yui looking back. “I can’t concentrate because of you.”

“Sure you can’t. What if you tried going for the ring instead of the body?”

“That’s a noobie trap. I’m aiming for the jaw this ti--”

“I-I’m good at these!” Rio abruptly interjected in the middle of Yui’s sentence.

She put a dollar into the machine and took an aggressive stance in front of it, stealing Yui’s position

They watched with bated breath as Rio operated the lever, eyes locked dead on target, smacking the button so hard it was almost a little startling.

Her vigor appeared to have transferred to the claw as it violently snatched the panda's jaw, reeling it in. The arm then opened, dropping it right into the hole.

"I did it!" Rio celebrated, quietly clapping to herself.

"Wow. In one go, as well."

Yuuki glanced over to Yui.

"Woah. Way to go, girl..." She said, her face ever so slightly twisted, her fists balled.

The sore loser within Yui was awakening.

Rio, oblivious to the fact, gleefully inserted her hand into the mouth of the machine, handing the retrieved plush toy over to Yuuki. "Here, take it."

"Oh, thanks. I'm sure Mina will love it."

"G-Glad to hear." Seeing Yuuki's smile, Rio responded with a slightly awkward smile of her own.

"Why don't you smile more? It suits you."

"A-Are you implying I'm mad all the time?!"

"You're not?"

Rio noticed, her cheeks flushing. "Hmph." She hastily put on a serious face.

Yuuki then felt a gaze coming from his side.

He turned to face it, only to find Yui looking like she had something on her mind. "Yes?"

"No, nothing." She averted her gaze.

Yui seemed a little upset about not being the one to win it. Even so, Rio couldn't have done it without Yui discovering the plushie to begin with.

"Yui. Thank you too."

"F-For what?"

"For trying."

"N-No prob." She mumbled, giving him the "I need to tell you something" eyes once again, only to remain silent.

"A shame I couldn't see the god hand in action though."

"Sure is! A real kick in the head, ain't it!" She exclaimed, locking her eyes onto the plushie in Yuuki's hands. "Watch where you're pointing that thing!" She socked the panda square in the jaw.

Her high school girl energy is only dropping.

"Yeah, watch it!" Rio, for some truly inexplicable reason, socked it as well.

The panda must've been frightened by this hazing ritual.

Yuuki protectively covered it with both hands. "There, there. They're just a bunch of meanies." He said, petting it.

Chapter Six

Yui the Intellectual

Later that night, Yui's room.

Yui laid face down on her bed, elbows to mattress, grinning to herself as she scrolled between the same couple of pictures on her phone.

Pictures which Mina had sent her in secret, of Yui and Yuuki together: one of them cuddling up on the sofa, Yui's head rested against his shoulder. One of her putting a comb through Yuuki's bed hair.

It was at this point that Yui told Mina to stop sending her pictures, yet even she couldn't help but recognize how nicely shot they were.

We may as well be dating. Now, if only I didn't get ambushed...

Those two were oddly suspect. Those two, of course, referring to Yuuki and Rio.

Yui and Rio got along now, yes, but their relationship got off to a rocky start at first. Rio was constantly on edge. Deadpan, largely taciturn, scary-faced.

She didn't react when spoken to yet would go into lecture mode if Yui ever ran a little late or had the gall to forget her homework. Rio had a borderline obsession with rules, a strong sense of justice in every fiber of her being.

Yui knew Rio was trouble long before they were seatmates as she was famous among her classmates for all the wrong reasons. She'd mostly mellowed out by this point but last year she would go around, all willy-nilly, dishing out lectures non-stop. Didn't help that she was in the disciplinary committee either.

Going into specifics would take all day but one episode in particular stood out in Yui's mind-- the time she started lecturing some guy for playing on his phone in class. It got quite heated and, surely enough, resulted in the confiscation of his phone. Rio was by no means in the wrong, yet the number of people that went to bat for her was a whopping zero. No one really cared enough to scold someone for something so trivial, let alone report them to a teacher over it. Naturally, the guy and his entire circle of friends were not pleased, yet Rio didn't seem to care one bit, brushing off their hostility ever so casually.

Ok, maybe I can't get closer to her. Even Yui had her doubts at first but, Rio being the way that she is, gave her all the more reason to persist. *No way am I enduring a whole year of this.*

Utilizing her natural bubbly charm, Yui tried to initiate conversation.

Rio's route proved quite difficult to navigate. At least until a single, seemingly trivial event occurred where Yui poked at her armpit, Rio's lips abruptly curling up into a smile. She had never seen Rio smile before and it was the cutest thing ever.

Terminal sourpuss with a stupidly cute smile... are you a moe character? And just like that, Yui didn't find her scary anymore.

The rest of Rio's route was a cakewalk now that Yui felt more comfortable around her. She even managed to squash the beef Rio had with the aforementioned group of guys, somehow. Point is, it took a lot of blood, sweat and tears for her to finally get anywhere with Rio. In just about a week or so, Yuuki had already made progress by leaps and bounds.

Is he actually a social monster?

The so-called "social monster" didn't bother speaking with other girls; Rio was the sole exception. None of this would've happened if Yui hadn't brought them together, not that she could've predicted the outcome even if she tried.

Cold, pretty, black hair. Is that your type... Yuuki?

Rio was easily one of the hottest among Yui's circle of friends, even if she was tragically unaware of the fact herself. They could hardly be compared one to another, given how little overlap they have in any regard.

They get along a little too well, no?

Yuuki seemed weirdly fascinated with Rio, the arcade episode being just one of many examples. Him calling Rio by her first name, the quiet whispers they'd shared, every now and then. Yui kept note of those details. It was all very suspect.

Aside from some slight personality "quirks," Rio was a high tier, damn near impeccable beaut. So, why did Yuuki give her all this attention? Didn't really look like she needed it.

Give some of it to me, meeeee!

Rio going after Yuuki... yeah, unlikely. She never spoke of love or romance, at all. Yui got the vibe that Rio was either avoiding or just flat out uninterested in the topic, which meant that Yuuki had to have made the first move.

Can't keep your hands off the next pretty thing, huh? The thought reared its ugly head.

"Why you, you--!" Yui furiously poked Yuuki's face. "Grrr…" She groaned, meaninglessly zooming in and out of the picture.

"You constipated?" A voice whispered in her ear.

Yui dropped her phone. "Hsss!" She jumped to her feet all cat-like, activating fight or flight mode, only to see Maki in her pajamas with a grin on her face. There was no door creak, no noisy footsteps, not even the slightest hint of her presence. "Finally decided to show yourself, assassin."

"You're already dead."

"That's not even the same series."

Ignoring her guarded demeanor, Maki got down on Yui's bed, giving her an outwardly soft, angelic smile.

"Something bugging you? You can tell me anything."

"No no, I was just... thinking of growing my hair out. Thoughts?"

"Don't. I can promise it'll look horrible on you."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because long hair isn't really to my liking."

"I don't remember asking."

Sparks flew as they locked eyes, then Maki's expression softened, her eyes narrowed as she started caressing Yui's hair.

"How about cutting it even shorter? Go for a more boyish look."

"Freak."

"My, someone is a bit of a potty mouth today, isn't she?" Maki brought her hand to Yui's cheek, pinching it. It hurt a little. Okay, a lot.

"S-Showyy."

"Lashing out like that, did something happen?"

"N-No…"

"Yui."

Yui averted her gaze, only for Maki to follow it, peering into her eyes. Her steady, piercing stare seemed able to read Yui like an open book.

Yui finally resigned to her fate, squeezing her eyes shut and diving into Maki's chest. "Maaaaki!"

"There there. Tell me everything."

Yui slapped Maki's hands, gravitating toward her butt, as per usual, away. "I'm gonna looose, the encounter is too strooong…"

"What are you fighting this time?"

“A succubus. I think, maybe.”

“Pardon?”

“A cool, intelligent, capable woman.”

“Mmhmm.” Maki nodded, having seemingly intuited the situation off of the little information she was given. “The appearance of a rival has you shook, I take it?”

“I don’t stand a chance. I *have* to shift forms.”

“To what, the intelligent type? Not happening.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t rely on miracles.”

“I see.”

Don’t rely on miracles. Agreed. Case closed.

Nonetheless, perhaps finding the conclusion unsatisfying, Maki pointed at Yui’s eyes. “Try putting on some glasses. Fit the aesthetic, at least.”

“The aesthetic, of course!”

“I have some fashion glasses laying around. Real cute ones.”

Maki left the room, returning a few minutes later with a pair of red, square glasses in hand. These weren’t your so-called “nerd” glasses; they had style.

Yui took the glasses with glee, immediately trying them on. “Dyuwah!”

“Dyu what?”

“You... don’t get the reference?”

“No, of course I don’t, you weirdo. No wonder you’re losing.” She said, coldly.

No, you just don’t get it. You don’t get anything. Yui grumbled to herself, putting the glasses on.

“These are kinda on the bigger side, aren’t they?”

“Well excuse me for having a fat head.”

“So, how do I look? Do I look smart?”

“Hmm…” Maki crossed her arms, frowning. A lukewarm reaction, to say the least.

Yui ignored her, taking a hand-mirror off the table and pointing it at herself. “Kyah, this is the look I was going for! This astute aesthetic! Ast*yu*te, if *yu* will!”

“Ast*yu*te sounds dangerously close to an insult, not gonna lie.”

“Look look! Yui the Intellectual: Origins! Click, click, click!” Yui pushed the bridge of her glasses up repeatedly, imitating the clicking sound they

made.

Maki silently watched for a bit before giving Yui the warm eyes and a smile. “At least you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Thanks, sis! Nothing can stop me now!”

“Yes yes, good for you. Anyway, aren’t midterms just around the corner? Should you be fooling around like this?“

“Don’t worry. There’s still plenty of time.”

Yui had a powerful ally by the name of Rio at her side, who she had asked to compile a “things likely to be on the midterms” notebook post-haste. The glasses also felt like they came with an int boost. Midterms were going to be a breeze.

“Did you see that? I made them glow.”

“Yes, yes.”

Victory is as good as mine. Yui couldn’t wait for the next school day.

***

And so came Monday.

Yui got to school slightly early. She greeted her friends curtly before heading straight to her seat, awaiting Yuuki’s arrival.

She set the study materials onto her desk, only to not pay any attention to them whatsoever, instead flashing excited glances at the door.

There he is.

Yuuki lumbered over, sleepy-eyed like any other morning.

In sharp contrast Yui energetically took the glasses out of her bag, quickly putting them on. As she lowered her gaze, Yui heard the neighboring desk’s chair scraping against the floor.

C’mon, c’mon.

Yui pretended to be absorbed in her studies, waiting for Yuuki to notice the glasses, but he didn’t even greet her. She glanced over and saw him absent-mindedly staring out the window, which finally made her lose patience.

“Morning.”

Yuuki looked over, giving her a slight nod before falling silent again. *What’s with the chin-sockable attitude?*

“That’s it?” She complained, forgetting about the glasses.

“Wouldn’t want to interrupt.”

It appeared Yuuki was trying to be considerate in his own right, even though Yui was, in fact, not studying whatsoever.

C’mon, notice. Notice the subtle change in vibe already.

As Yui silently pressured him, Yuuki finally rested his eyes on her face. “That’s odd.”

“Hmm? O-Oh, you mean the glasses? Funny you–”

“No, your hair. It’s standing up.”

“It’s just a little frizzy, okay?”

He has to be doing this on purpose, right?

After furiously hand combing her hair, Yui brought the conversation back. “My eyesight isn’t what it used to be. Must’ve been all that studying, y’know?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I studied literally all day yesterday. *Literally*.”

Yui spent the entire morning rereading a few of her beloved shounen manga volumes before getting to the newest one. Mom and sister were going shopping in the afternoon, so she went with and had dinner at a restaurant. It was delish.

“I see…”

Yuuki was staring at her glasses, so she took the opportunity to show off her signature push up maneuver. Yuuki’s stare only further intensified, no doubt drawn by Yui’s overwhelming aura of genius.

“Hmm?”

“You look like one of those people who wear glasses just to look smart.”

“Oh, *those*.” Yui vigorously nodded. “It’s sad, really.”

Yuuki abruptly knitted his brow, groaning. *It’s working.*

“Something wrong?”

“They’re blinding.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Look away, please.”

Screw you! Try saying that to any actual speccy! Yui thought but held back; The smart bespectacled type would never say something like that. Y*ou’re the smart, chill glasses beaut. Act like it.*

“Speaking of which, have you made any notable progress in your studies, perhaps?”

“Not really, no. Mina’s been a bit of a pain. You must’ve made amazing progress, studying *literally* all day.”

“I suppose you could say that, yes. Feel free to throw any pertinent inquiries regarding confounding material my way.”

“Why... are you talking like that?”

“Whatever do you mean? This is how I always talk.”

“Hmm, no. No, you don’t.”

“Why of course I do, silly.”

“Definitely not.”

“Can it, wise guy.”

“There, that’s more like it.”

That’s more like it? Who do you take me for? That was less Yui the Intellectual and more Yui the Yakuza. *Okay, now focus up. You’re Yui the Intellectual. You’re ast*yu*te.* She reminded herself.

“I don’t get this one.”

“Alright, I suppose it can’t hurt helping poor ol’ Yuuki out.” Yui spoke a big game as she took a peek at the workbook he passed over.

It turned out to be math, the kind where you’d already be half-asleep by the time you finished reading the paragraph long questions. Yui thought she had maxed out on intelligence but, in reality, all she did was put on glasses. Fashion glasses, at that.

What is this? What am I even looking at?

“Mhmm. Yes, I see.” Yui nodded repeatedly as she passed her eyes through the text. “You see it’s a… a trick question. Yes, a trick question, no doubt.”

“How do I find X and Z?”

“Simple. To find X-Men and Z-Man you first want to–”

“Nevermind. Forget I asked.”

“W-Wait!”

Yui latched onto the corner of Yuuki’s workbook as he pulled it away.

“Let go. It’ll tear.” He calmly said, pushing her hand aside. “I’ll ask Rio later. You probably don’t know the answer anyway.”

“N-No! You can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Be-Because I was friends with Rio first? Do you even know how many battles it took me to get her on my side?”

“B-Battles?”

Yui turned toward the meek voice, only to find Rio standing behind her desk like some guardian spirit. She almost fell out of her chair in horror.

“H-Hey, Rio! N-Need anything?”

“Does she need a reason to be here?”

“I wasn’t talking to you!”

Yuuki interjects immediately, Rio's acting all awkward... They're up to no good, I can feel it. Rio had never turned up at their classroom without Yui specifically asking her to come, not once. *Don't tell me she... came here to see Yuuki? No, don't be silly.*

"I, err, I thought I'd drop by on my way to the b-b-bathroom." Rio stammered out, mustering a forced smile.

Fishy. Very fishy. Rio blinked blankly as Yui observed her, surprise written on her face.

"Spectacle Yui…"

Spectacloey?What is this, some kind of new gen pokeman? Yui tilted her head quizically, only to remember that she was, indeed, wearing glasses. *Why's she looking at me funny? Did she notice they're fashion glasses?*

"M-My eyesight's a little, you know. It's rough, sitting at the very back."

"Maybe I should do it too... start wearing glasses."

"Eh?"

"I've been thinking about wearing glasses in class. Can't really see the blackboard at times."

Rio's terrifying proclamation shook Yui. *She's already smart, the glasses are only gonna make her even smarterer. Worst of all, she's stealing my thunder. Copycat!*

"Th-Then we'll b-both be wearing glasses."

"Rio, no! Glasses are a last resort!"

"E-Eh?"

"Exercise time! Keep your eyes on my finger!"

Yui pointed her index finger up, slowly moving it back and forth. After repeating the action enough times, she'd restore Rio's vision eventually, just like on TV.

"You can see it, you've only convinced yourself you can't." Yui repeated what she remembered hearing.

As she continued bringing her finger to and away from Rio's confused face, Yuuki, somewhat astonished, interjected with, "Okay, you can stop being stupid now."

"S-Stupid?"

"Rio, I need help with this one." Yuuki beckoned her over, tapping a page on his workbook.

He had just turned to Rio over Yui despite the glasses. The situation was dire. *Now's not the time for eye training exercises!*

“Woah woah woah! Who let you ask for help, exactly?”

“Why are you making a big deal out of this?”

“Because it is! Please follow the proper Yui Incorporated office procedures!” Yui spread her arms out, blocking Yuuki’s path.

“Move.” He pushed her to the side by the armpit.

One soft touch to her vital area sent Yui down to one knee and nearly made her go ahn. Well, she *did* go ahn, but only a little.

“It looks tricky at first glance but if you just…”

Yuuki dragged Rio away in this moment of weakness, a Yui-less lecture had begun at his desk. Rio, who she had hoped would refuse, instead began patiently explaining step by step-- likely her teacher instinct kicking in.

“I see. You really are amazing, Rio.”

“It’s kind of a trick question, I think.”

“Right, right?” Yui stuck her head in so as to not feel left out and went along with the conversation.

Yuuki stopped nodding, giving her what felt like an “imposter spotted” look. “Ask Rio to help you out with any difficulties.”

“Difficulties? Wh-What difficulties?”

Begging for Rio’s help meant instant defeat for Yui the Intellectual.

“Uh-huh.” Yuuki shot her a quick glance, flipping through his workbook and pointing at a different page as he turned back to Rio. “There’s also this one…”

The two gazed down at the workbook as if to say “we’ve had enough of you, pseudo-intellectual,” their heads practically touching.

Irritated, Yui stepped away. Carefully adjusting the angle, she reflected sunlight off her glasses and into Yuuki’s eyes. *Eat this!*

Yuuki frowned, getting up from his seat and marching over to Yui. He was deadpan but also felt angry, somehow. It was hard to tell.

“Wh-What?”

“Come.” He said, grabbing Yui’s arm and heading toward the door.

The sheer abruptness, the forcefulness sent Yui into a light panic as Yuuki dragged her across the hallway, rounding a corner into a, mostly empty, connecting corridor.

He, then, finally released her and, with a somewhat stern expression, said, “Rio came over to chat with you. Quit messing around and talk to her.”

How bold, dragging me off by the arm in front of everyone. No guy’s ever been so forceful with me before. Is this... the intellectual effect?

“Are you listening?”

“Y-Yes?”

Crap, didn’t hear a thing.

Yuuki made an astonished look before abruptly putting on a smile, the tension in his face lifting. “Alright, if there’s anything you want to say, say it. I’m listening.” He said, his tone of voice soft, shifting into his rare gentle mode. Yuuki had a kind heart deep down, a big brother’s heart.

Is it time? Time to activate intellicute mode?

Yui pulled her chin as far back as she could, giving Yuuki the puppy dog eyes. She practiced the perfect angle in front of a mirror yesterday, to make sure the glasses didn’t get in the way.

“Y-Yuuki…”

Stop eyeing other girls, you are mine... that’s the clincher right there, an instant one-way ticket to horny jail. Now you just need to say it. Keep the vibe jokey and you won’t embarrass yourself... probably, maybe. The technique is beyond next level; His heart races while you maintain a comfy veil of irony. Victory is as good as yours. However, nevertheless, that being said, actually delivering the line is a li-li-li-little...

And yet, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity to turn the tides in one fell swoop. The line held that much potential.

“S-Stop–”

“Stop?”

Unfortunately, the warning bell went off at that exact moment. Yui calmed her nerves as she waited for it to stop.

I need to spit it out, fast. Time’s running out.

She gulped.

“Y-You–”

“Didn’t you hear the bell? Class is about to start.”

“SEOG-YAM?!”

Yui let out a kung fu master style scream in response to the sudden loud voice to her back.

The male teacher’s eyes widened in horror, “U-Uhh?”

Crap. Yui put on a great big smile.

“L-Looking sharp in that suit, Miura!”

“Th-Thanks. Now head back to class.”

“Aye aye!”

Yui pulled through, she got a weird look on her way out, yes, but she pulled through.

Phew, I almost seog-yam'd a teacher!

Stop eyeing other girls, you are mine, or seog-yam for short.

Pff. Lee, the yandere.

Yuuki looked at her funny as Yui imagined a martial artist swinging his fists about going seog-yam.

"Why the smirking?"

"D-Don't ask."

Yui wiped her brow.

She then noticed Yuuki staring.

"Yui…"

"Y-Yes?"

Yuuki began fumbling around in his pocket, only to suddenly reach out his arm, grabbing Yui's. Her heart started pounding at yet another unexpected sneak attack.

"Y-Yuuki?"

"It's a little expensive but here, take it." He said, placing something inside her hand, something round and hard, almost like a stone. "I need to go to the bathroom. Talk later." He promptly sped off.

Yui tried not to think about how going to the bathroom was more important than her as she opened her palm. It looked like a healing crystal, or rather, it *was* a healing crystal.

A little expensive... a high-end worry stone, in other words. Great, so he does think I'm mentally unstable!

"Ha-chaa!" Yui slammed her fist against the wall, a hollow bang echoing across the hall.

"Takatsuki?"

It was quickly followed by a relaxed female voice.

Yui whipped her head around and saw Kogawa standing there with a puzzled look, a file full of papers tucked underneath her arm.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, she says. What are you doing out here? Homeroom is about to start."

"There was a fly on the wall."

"Fly? I don't see any fly. Is there anything... bothering you? Midterm stress, perhaps?"

“Nope, my days are filled with nothing but joy and laughter.”

“Uh-huh. I think we need to have a talk. Can you swing by the teachers’ room during lunch break?”

“That might be a little difficult.”

Being a high-strung worrywart, a forceful one at that, Kogawa’s talks were needlessly long-winded.

Her personality coupled with her gentle looks earned her an “angelic” or “wholesome” reputation among the boys. Yui, however, didn’t really, no, she just straight up didn’t like Kogawa due to her somewhat resembling Maki.

“Huh, glasses?” Kogawa brought her face right up to Yui’s, examining her fashion glasses as if she had just taken notice. “Are those... real?”

“Oh, they’re real alright.”

“Show me.”

“Can’t, it’ll undo my transformation.”

“Actually, let’s meet after school; Take all the time we need.”

Grrrrrrrr.

“Off we go now. Homeroom’s about to start.” Kogawa said, gently nudging Yui all the way to the classroom.

Chapter Seven

Bento, Again

Yui got home much later than usual that day. She tossed her bag off at her room and, without even taking the time to change, tiptoed over to Maki's.

Yui slowly reached for the door knob, ready to get some much needed payback, only for it to turn as the door abruptly swung open.

"Eek."

"What exactly are we up to here?" Maki poked her head out.

"Here." Yui timidly held her glasses out. "Don't need these anymore."

"That was quick. Not that I expected it to go any different."

Why didn't you stop me then? Moron. She thought about saying, only to realize it'd mean admitting defeat. *Actually, now that I think about it, what's wrong with me? Putting on glasses to look smart... Even a grade schooler would've dropped the idea in five minutes.*

"It's kinda like an enchanter dabbling in conjuration. I guess you could say I wasted memory slots."

"An awfully fancy way of admitting defeat."

"That's when it hit me. Fighting the enemy on their turf is the height of stupidity, so why don't I double down on my strengths instead?"

After some intense introspection on the way back home, Yui rediscovered her true forte. *Taking all my war records into consideration, the answer is clear.*

"What's the one skill a woman can't go without?" Yui asked, pretending to stir.

"Mimery?"

"Good one."

It was, of course, cooking and where does that road lead? Bento.

"It all inevitably comes full circle; the starting point is the highest point."

"Realized that's all you have going for you, huh?"

"That's it! No more bento for you!" Yui turned toward the door, scurrying back to her room.

Maki ran after her, latching onto her arm. "Wait, don't go! I know all your good areas!"

"Such as?" Maki didn't answer, instead quietly lifting her hand from below. Yui immediately snatched her wrist. "Let me guess, my ass?"

"Yes but I wouldn't use that word. Too dirty."

Yui knew Maki's tricks like the back of her hand.

I don't have time for this. After shooing her away, Yui wondered what to put in the bento as she returned to her room. *Forte. Cooking. Bento. Butt. Ass. Bass? Huh.*

***

Yui just barely made it to school in time the following morning.

Yuuki heard the chair to his side scraping against the floor, so he glanced over and noticed a striking lack of glasses. He gave her a quiet stare. Yui, however, just sat there looking pretty, as if confused by his gaze.

"Where are your glasses?"

"I slept my bad eyesight off."

That's some serious self-regeneration.

Sensing zero hint of sarcasm in her voice, Yuuki decided not to delve any further. Besides, he had studying to do.

He had barely made any progress back home; it was hard to focus with Mina around.

As Yuuki prepared to make up for lost time, Yui abruptly extended her hand, placing a box-shaped object wrapped in floral fabric onto his desk.

"Hmm? Is that... some kind of explosive?"

"It's a bento. I'm giving it to you."

"What? Why?"

"It's, erm, my way of saying sorry for yesterday, you know?"

"I don't."

"It's a, uhh, whatchamacallit, thank you gift, yes, 'thank you for the stone' gift!"

The reasoning felt a tad forced.

Yuuki didn't really know what to make of it but he took the bento anyway, deciding not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

As he stuffed it into his bag, Yui leaned over and whispered, "I put in bass."

"And?"

"Silly Yuuki, I know how much you love bass."

Yuuki had no idea what she was going on about, so he just ignored her.

In any case, she seems awfully relaxed. *Are her studies coming along that well?*

***

And then, lunch break.

Yuuki took the bento out and was about to dig in when Yui's girl friends started gathering at her desk in one's and two's, again. Going ham on the bento suddenly didn't feel all that appealing anymore.

There were also the stares, particularly from a certain member of the lady squad. Maybe she was curious to see his reaction? No clue.

When they eventually started getting loud, Yuuki took the bento and got up from his seat.

I'd like to enjoy it somewhere quiet. It's not everyday that I get to eat a bento. He thought, the usual spot springing to mind. *Rio is... probably not there. Can't imagine she eats at that place every single day.* Yuuki thought as he walked out, heading toward the back of the school.

He knew his way around; it wasn't his first time.

Yuuki stepped across a few jutting concrete sections, turning a corner further in and there he was.

"Well."

Nevermind then.

Rio humbly sat in her usual spot, wolfing an onigiri down with a manga in hand. She lifted her eyes up from the manga, only to immediately lower them back down.

Yuuki paid no heed, sitting down next to her.

"*Critical Attack on Titan*, huh." Rio was reading the same manga Yui had bought on their previous outing. Yet, upon further inspection, it appeared to be a rental. "Why not ask Yui to lend you hers…"

She ignored Yuuki's mutter, silently darting her eyes from panel to panel. Rio flipped the pages at insane speeds, almost like she was in a speed reading competition with herself.

"Is it fun?"

"It's a pretty fun manga, yes."

"No, reading like that."

"I haven't skipped a single line. I understand what it's going for thematically."

“Yes, but is it fun?”

“It’s not about fun. I’m studying the series, so Yui and I have more to talk about.”

“How about you study for midterms instead?”

“I’ve already studied more than I’d like to admit. There’s not much to do... alone.”

The pause aroused genuine pity.

Rio tossed the rest of the onigiri into her mouth then looked at Yuuki.

“I suppose eating and reading is a bit rude. Not that I’d care, if there was no one else around.” She said as if taking an indirect jab at Yuuki, closing the manga.

On a cloth to her side sat a bento.

“What’s that?”

“My bento. That I made.”

“That *you* made? You can make bento?“

“Are you mocking me? Making bento is easy, all you need is a bit of time and energy.”

Rio stated matter of factly. *Definitely high level.*

The tamagoyaki was cut into evenly sliced pieces, the cylinder-shaped onigiri were neatly arranged, all uniform in size. The boiled spinach and hijiki looked nice as well, not a piece spilling over into the neighboring partitions. It was like something straight out of a cooking book.

“Wh-What are you staring at?”

“Just appreciating how the bento reflects your personality.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Yuuki decided not to elaborate on account of Rio’s terrifying expression, opening the lid to Yui’s bento, only to be immediately bombarded with pink.

A heart-shaped... time bomb?

A piece of pan-seared sea bass sat on a vaguely heart-shaped bed of pink rice, its grains scattered everywhere. It appeared as though Yuuki’s earlier explosive comment wasn’t too far off the mark. He was partly at fault for shaking the bento up, yes, but the rice was supposed to stick.

As Yuuki, who was flabbergasted, wondered if this was some novel form of harassment, Rio tried to take a curious peak inside, so he popped the lid back on.

“Why’d you close it.”

“You see…”

Yuuki was hesitant about showing *that* next to Rio's bento.

Rio, however, appeared to have gotten the wrong idea, her voice suddenly taking on a soft tone.

"I understand. You must feel guilty, having to eat your mom's bento in such a lonely place."

"My mom is no longer with us."

"O-Oh. Sorry."

"It's okay."

And you don't feel guilty? Yuuki thought. *Although I guess she did make her own bento. Not that I'd feel even the tiniest bit of guilt, even if my mom did make it.*

"So... did you make it yourself?"

"No, Yui gave it to me." Yuuki came clean, immediately regretting his decision.

Rio, predictably enough, leaned in with her eyes aglow. "Y-Yui, you say? C-Can I have some?"

"Nope."

"Let's trade then!"

"Nuh-uh."

"Just a bite! Just one!"

"Alright, alright. If that's what it takes to get you off my back."

He popped the lid off, revealing the eldritch horrors inside.

Upon witnessing the scattered rice bento, Rio gave Yuuki a serious look. "What's this?"

"It, uhh, got a little shook up."

"It looks delicious. Steak roll, please."

She, however, didn't seem to care all that much.

What fortitude.

"One."

Rio nabbed a steak roll with lightning fast chopstick technique, carrying it into her mouth. She closed her eyes, chewing slowly, deliberately, really admiring the flavor.

As she was thoroughly enjoying her moment of bliss, Yuuki dug in, gathering up all the scattered rice grains into one place.

"Woah woah woah! Slow down! Appreciate the flavor!"

"We'll be here all day if I savor every bite."

"Then share. I'll help you finish."

“You wish.” Yuuki blocked the bento off with his body.

Rio shot him an envious glare. “This must be some kind of joke, right? At my expense. You’re not her boyfriend or anything, it doesn’t make any sense for her to make you a bento.”

That’s right, it didn’t, and yet she did anyway.

“But what’s odd is that it definitely tastes like Yui’s cooking. She shared a bento with me once, I’d know.”

“Even the bass?”

“Besides the bass.”

“You... remember what her cooking tastes like?”

“It’s not that big of a deal. Stop pretending like it’s weird.”

It seems even her taste buds are high level. Although, now she feels a little scary in a different sense.

When Yuuki slowed his eating pace down a little to appease Rio, she pressed him with an accusatory stare.

“You bought it off of her, didn’t you? Fess up!”

“I did not.”

“You groveled at her feet?”

“I did not.”

“Which means you stole–”

“No.”

What does she take me for? Although I did try to give Yui money the last time she handed me a bento, so she’s not completely off the mark.

Rio knitted her brow. “Hmm…” She abruptly lifted her head, slapping her knee and raising her voice. “I get it now! You have some kind of dirt on Yui, don’t you? You forced her into making you that bento! It also explains why she’s so... friendly with you! I’ll rescue Yui from your evil clutches!” She exclaimed, tackling Yuuki.

Rio held back no punches; she was out for blood.

Yuuki lost balance as he evacuated his bento outside the danger zone, falling to the ground. Rio promptly mounted him. It legitimately felt like she was going to choke him out at this rate..

“H-Hear me out. It’s all part of Yui’s plan to win the affection of her seatmate.”

And thus, Yuuki finally coughed up the truth, or rather, thought that Rio deserved to know. *Besties should know everything about one another, both the good and the bad.*

Yuuki's words appeared to have caught Rio completely off guard, as her grip abruptly loosened. "What do you mean?"

"Yui, well, she's... the seatmate killer." Yuuki revealed as he got back up to his feet.

Rio furrowed her brow. "The seatmate killer?"

"I think the bento is part of her scheme."

It was easy to forget sometimes that Yui was, indeed, the dreaded seatmate killer. A gifted actress and natural-born liar, she'd do anything in pursuit of her goals. After capturing her victim's affection, she'd seemingly lose all interest.

In the past few days her true colors had started to show around Rio as well.

"She's toying with me too, in other words."

"N-No. You're lying." She said as doubt clouded her eyes. Rio held her head, blinking rapidly. "Wait, wait. I need to process this." Knowing Rio, her brain must've been processing at a formidable pace. Slowly but surely her face painted over with anger. "So that's why she... she suddenly got all friendly the second we became seatmates!" She finally clutched her head.

Harsh, yes, but necessary for those two to become true besties.

"Even now she's following some dumb guy around! She made him a bento, a bento for crying out loud!"

"Was the subtle jab really necessary? I'm telling you, she's the seatmate killer. It's all a game to her."

"The seatmate killer... all a game. Y-Y-Yuiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!" Rio gazed up at the sky, her eyes shooting open as she screamed Yui's name at the top of her lungs. She then rose vigorously to her feet. "It was all a lie, all of it! Her smile, everything! She tricked me! She toyed with me! Curse you, seatmate killer!" Rio clenched her fists, shaking.

Yuuki thought she'd be a little more skeptical but Rio, surprisingly enough, took it at face value. *Perhaps she had her suspicions as well.*

Rio looked like she was about to put someone six feet under, so Yuuki tried calming her.

"Rio."

"What? You want some too?" Rio went into "seatmate break your spine" stance.

I should explain everything from the start, to avoid any more weird misunderstandings.

“Sorry, I misspoke. Yui’s actually possessed by the seatmate killer demon.”

“Eh?”

“It’s some deep-seated trauma that’s making her act this way, that twisted her mind. The real Yui is a reasonably good person... probably, hopefully.”

“That means Yui... is not toying with her seatmates by choice?”

“Exactly. It’s the demon’s influence.”

Rio crossed her arms, putting a broody face on. “Hmm, I see. So if we exercise this demon my Yui’ll come back?”

Yuuki didn’t actually know as he had never seen the original Yui himself. It wasn’t going to be ’her’ Yui either way but he chose to keep that to himself.

“I’d imagine so, yeah.”

“And knowing this you…”

“Will watch over her from a distance, biding my time.”

“You’re trying to perform an exorcism alone, in other words? Aah, so you’re a priest, then?”

Priest? Yuuki tilted his head.

Rio abruptly took his hand into hers. “I wish to, nay, allow me to join you in your quest of defeating L*yu*cifer, priest Yuuki.” She said with a shimmer in her eye.

Guess I’m a priest now.

Yuuki retrieved his hand without saying a word, feeling a bit weirded out.

Rio, awfully enthusiastic all of the sudden, continued anyway. “So, what do we do?”

“We don’t really do anything. We simply watch over her, you see.”

“That’s it? Can’t we speed up the process somehow?”

“If only it was that simple.”

“Ok, tell me, what is the seatmate killer’s current plan of attack?”

Yuuki tilted his head, surprised by the abrupt question. *I could go all day but if I had to pick one...*

“We’re competing in the upcoming midterms. The loser has to give a yes ticket to the winner.”

“A yes ticket. I see, that’s how she’s trying to ensnare you. How very seatmate killer-y.” She said as though she was a seatmate killer expert. Rio

knitted her brow, letting her gaze wander. “We can use this to our advantage. If you win, you can use your yes ticket to reform L*yu*cifer.”

“I don’t know. What if she’s like ‘here, have a nice concert!’”

“What?”

Why does she have to take everything I say with a straight face?

“I don’t think that’ll work.”

“Ok, how about this then: first you win by a landslide, then you take that yes ticket and rip it up right in front of her face. That ought to inflict significant emotional damage, even to the seatmate killer.”

That does sound rather traumatizing.

Whether or not it’d exorcise the demon was to be seen. What was clear, however, is that Rio knew exactly how to get under people’s skin. That said, Yuuki didn’t want to go too far as Yui seemed a tad... unstable as of late.

“Hmm, don’t know about that one either. We’re still working under the assumption that I win.”

“That’s why I’ll compile notes of ‘things that’ll be on the midterms guaranteed to net you easy points’ just for you.”

Yes ticket aside, this turned out to be an unexpected stroke of luck as Yuuki was just starting to feel the pressure from the midterms mount. *Yui challenges me then goes and calls a friend. It was never a fair competition to begin with.*

Like a drowning man to a rescue buoy, Yuuki decided to go along.

“Sounds good.”

“Maybe I should hand her ‘no way these would ever be on the midterms, moron’ style notes?”

“Dirty.”

“It’s for her own good. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But it’s a competition, our notes have to be the same. Won’t inflict much damage if she starts complaining.”

“You’re right. A priest of your caliber really knows his stuff.”

“Can you not?”

Yuuki wondered if she was even listening as Rio nodded on in admiration, bringing her face closer, somewhat excitedly. “So, how are your studies coming along? Think you can do it?”

“Ehhh, not too great.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say my studying environment is... not ideal.”

Yuuki couldn't focus at school because of, well, obvious reasons. At home there was Mina, who'd often interrupt him. There was also the fact that his father, who came back home last holiday, dragged him out to a shinto shrine.

"Study somewhere else then: the library, or study hall."

"Yes but I also need to keep an eye on my little sister, make sure she's studying."

Yuuki also felt a little paranoid leaving her alone at home all day. Even if he did, she'd probably pester him with questions like "When are you coming home? Why aren't you home? Do you hate me?"

"Alright, guess I'll just need to handle her and let you study in peace."

"Eh?"

You only say that because you have no idea who you're up against. Seeing the determination in her face, Yuuki felt a little, no, he felt nothing but concern.

Chapter Eight

Mina vs Rio

Afterschool.

Yuuki and Rio returned to his place.

She told him there was "no time to waste" and that she'd "take care" of his sister. Although Yuuki wasn't overly enthusiastic, he knew Rio had a knack for teaching. The manner in which she explained things had this almost professional quality to it.

Maybe she'll get through to her. Holding onto this faint hope, Yuuki brought Rio over.

He opened the door, entering the living room. Mina, who laid on the sofa gaming, rose up.

"Yuukie, welcome ba–"

The moment she spotted a figure at his back, she lost balance, tumbling off of the sofa. Mina didn't even bother getting up as she crawled out of the living room.

Rio watched as if coming upon a new species of animal, turning her gaze to Yuuki. "What... did I just witness?"

"Give me a second."

Yuuki left Rio in the living room as he walked over to Mina's room, presumably where she fled. There he, to no one's surprise, found Mina, peeking out the door.

I'm getting deja vu.

"Mina, come out. We have a guest over."

"Guest? You didn't tell me you were bringing a guest over!"

Mina pouted as she stuck her head out to sneak a peek into the living room, her eyes widening.

"Yuukie, you... dumped Yui for another woman?! Already?!"

"It's not what it looks like."

"Then what is she doing here?"

"She's just... someone I met recently. She's super smart, so I thought I'd ask her to help you study."

"Help me study? As if I asked?! Nope, that's it, now Minaterasu's angry. Hide in iwato, no, narito angry!" She said, shutting the door, only to immediately open it back up a little. "Although if you were to pay me three

visits and pet me on the head, I, Mina Zhuge, might just forgive you." She said with a satisfied look on her face.

"Petting aside, you know the three visits?"

"Of course. Zhuge Liang's the guy who shoots lasers. Cool, right?"

"I think you're talking about the video game character."

She probably gets her random trivia knowledge from video games.

Mina dove into Yuuki's arms with an oof, when suddenly.

"What's taking so long?"

Yuuki turned around, only to see Rio standing directly behind him with a miffed look on her face. Unlike Yui, it looked like she wasn't going to patiently stand around waiting for them to finish.

"Alright, let's get studying."

Mina immediately took cover behind Yuuki's back. Rio didn't care for Mina's games, trying to drag her out by the hand. She was quite forceful, again, in sharp contrast to Yui.

Mina, meanwhile, bunched herself up so as to not get caught, using Yuuki as a shield.

"She has a scary face." She whispered, running back to her room and slamming the door shut.

"Why'd you let her escape?" Rio pressed him with said scary face.

No wonder she got that impression.

Yuuki himself felt the same way as Rio's eyes were slightly slanted by default. He decided to repeat what Mina said word for word.

"She said you have a scary face."

"S-Scary? What's so scary about my face?"

"I think you might want to try smiling."

Smile... smile.

The first thing that popped into mind was that one picture of Yui. Yuuki pulled it up on his phone, showing it to Rio. "Use this as reference."

"I-Is this the picture you mentioned earlier? Why is she making that face?"

"Ask her."

Rio seemed skeptical at first but the corners of her lips gradually turned up as she kept staring at it. The picture had a kind of invigorating effect, the uncanny power to bring a smile to one's face.

"Hold that smile. I'll be right back."

After handing his phone to Rio Yuuki opened the door to Mina's room, heading inside. It appeared to be empty at a glance, were it not for the not-so-subtle humps under the blanket. He pulled it off and, surely enough, found Mina, all curled up and pretending to sleep. Her cover was blown completely yet Mina remained calm, not saying a word.

"Midterms are right around the corner and you haven't done any studying, have you?"

"Sure I have. I'm the type to work hard from the shadows, is all." Mina slowly turned her head toward Yuuki, a shit-eating grin on her face.

She thinks she can talk her way out.

"Rio is going to help you study."

"Buuuuuut she seems arrogant, looks scary *and* gives off major friendless vibes."

Says you. Although, Yuuki couldn't deny Rio was rather friendless.

"The friend thing, well, it's... complicated."

"Huh…" Mina abruptly settled down.

The friendless connection?

Yuuki dragged Mina out of bed, exiting the room together. Outside they were greeted by Rio, who had somehow managed to maintain a smile.

"Okay, I guess now we can begin."

Even her voice felt softer than usual.

Mina nervously gazed up at Rio from behind Yuuki's back. "If you can beat me in a game of Bash Bros, that is."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why should I?" Rio shot back without delay.

Mina looked flabbergasted, as if Rio's response came completely out of left field, while Yuuki couldn't help but wonder why Yui didn't take a similar approach.

"If you don't do well on your midterms, we'll just confiscate your video games."

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"You didn't?" Rio asked, appalled.

Sensing the gravity of the situation, Mina poked her head out once more, pointing at Rio. "No, that's inhuman! Don't just stand there! Do something, Yukkie! Throw her out!" Mina frantically shook and banged on his back. Yuuki, needless to say, wasn't exactly on Mina's side on the matter, which

only made her even more aggro. “Who do you think you are? What are you to Yuukie anyway?” She screamed out from the cover of Yuuki’s back.

A hint of hesitation appeared on Rio’s face. “I’m…” She glanced over Yuuki, her eyes downcast.

He thought she’d spout off something moronic like “I’m priest Yuuki’s faithful servant” but it appeared she managed to hold back the urge in front of Mina.

But then, how do I describe our relationship?

Rio’s gaze cried out for help, so Yuuki replied in her stead. “She’s my... friend.”

“Eh?” Rio raised her head, her eyes widening.

Caught off guard by her reaction, Yuuki asked, “Am I wrong?”

“U-Uh-uh.” Rio shook her head slightly, unsmiling her smile.

Mina, seemingly smelling weakness in the air, jumped out in front of Rio, talking mad trash right in her face. “Friends? Friends, huh? Yui’s way more funny and interesting than you’ll ever be. I mean, you’re too scared to face me in a video game. What could I *possibly* hope to learn from you?”

If Yui was here she’d probably respond with something along the lines of “Hello, I’m your elder?”

Rio blinked, gently lowering her voice. “You’re on.” With just three words, she shook the room.

Sensing imminent disaster, Yuuki promptly interjected. “Rio, don’t.”

“I’ve played Bash Bros before. Don’t worry.”

“You have?”

“Yui mentioned liking the game, so I borrowed my little brother’s copy to get a bit of practice in.”

Brother?

Rio having a brother aside, the “a bit” part didn’t really inspire much confidence. A bit of practice simply wasn’t going to cut it against someone like Mina.

Mina jumped out in front of Yuuki as if she had long been waiting for this very moment. “Then it’s settled! Hehehe, I’ll smash you to pieces, just like Yui.” She smirked, returning to the living room.

The TV had been on the whole time, running a game Mina had played with Yui before-- Bash Bros.

Mina took two controllers, placing the first on one side of the sofa and taking the other to the opposite side. Rio picked up her controller, brushing

up her hair as she sat down. Her movements were as calm as always, likely a product of arrogance.

This is going to be a repeat of the Yui incident, isn't it? Yuuki was already getting concerned just seeing Rio's controller handling.

"Hmm, who should I pick?"

Mina, full of confidence coming fresh off of the Yui stomp, took her sweet time going over characters, her cursor wandering aimlessly.

Rio, meanwhile, wasted no time locking in hers. Mina shot Rio a quick glare before quickly locking one in herself.

As soon as the match started, Rio's character began attacking the air.

"Oh dear, don't know what the buttons do? Too bad! The world of Bash Bros is cruel and unforgiving!" Mina exclaimed, charging straight toward Rio's character.

No shot. She's done.

As much as Yuuki would've loved to cheer Rio on, seeing her get stomped was just too painful. Just as he was about to look away from the screen, Rio's character suddenly moved out of the way, punishing Mina with a counterattack.

"What?!"

In the time it took Mina to exclaim so, Rio chain attacked her for tons of damage.

Mina appeared to have realized she wasn't up against some newbie, leaning slightly forward as she went in on the offensive.

"The frame advantage is mine. Perfect shield this, punish." Rio spoke some kind of weird language as she countered effortlessly.

After knocking Mina's character back, Rio started spamming projectiles at her.

Dirty.

Mina, losing patience, rushed in, only to be greeted with a jump attack.

"Stop spamming!"

"All's fair in love and war."

"Grr."

Rio repeated the pattern with mechanical precision, taking favorable trade after favorable trade. Mina knew it was coming but it appeared Rio outclassed her so hard it didn't even matter; She just ate it again and again. Yuuki didn't even know what was happening, he just kind of watched.

“What kind of robot freak are you!” Mina finally cried out as the letters KO flashed across the screen. Having been served a massive upset, Mina was understandably upset. “That didn’t feel fair at all…”

“The strategy I used is a little nasty. How about another round then? No cheese this time.”

“Y-You’re on!”

***

“Y-You’re too good…”

A few dozen minutes later, after multiple character and stage changes, Mina still hadn’t won a single game. She got close a few times but just couldn’t clutch it out in the end.

Mina hung her head, letting go of the controller. It appeared she had had enough. “Why… How...“

The unexpected turn of events left Yuuki in just as much awe as her.

Unlike a certain someone, Rio didn’t start screaming “I won! Let’s gooo!” like a complete moron. She calmly put her controller down, placing her hand on Mina’s shoulder with a warm smile. “You played well, astonishingly well. You’re using your head. Only a smart kid can do that.”

Instead of rubbing it in her face, Rio had nothing but words of praise.

Mina was uneasy at first, as if expecting Rio to break out into a victory dance or something, but her face lit up at the unexpected kind words. “She said I’m a smart kid, Yuukie!”

“Cool.”

It was perhaps the first time Mina had ever been praised for her gaming skills. Yuuki being himself had no idea if the praise was warranted or not, but he took Rio’s word for it.

“I didn’t know you were a god gamer, Rio.”

“Far from it. The path to godhood isn’t so easily tread.”

She practiced so she could play with Yui, huh? With a skill gap as wide as that, won’t you just... further deepen the rift between you two? The thought crossed Yuuki’s mind, but he decided to keep it to himself.

“Let’s go study in your room, Mina. And as for you, Yuuki…” Rio got up, rummaging through her bag. She took out a thin stack of papers, handing it to Yuuki. It appeared to be a copy of the elusive notes of “things guaranteed to be on the midterms”. “Here.”

“Thanks.”

After handing Yuuki the notes, Rio and Mina left the living room.

The most surprising part was that Mina didn’t talk back whatsoever. She became awfully obedient, as if recognizing Rio’s alpha status.

Yuuki, left to his own devices, began studying at the living room table using Rio’s notes. The notes exceeded expectation: Rio’s summaries were simple and easy to digest.

Yuuki thought Mina would come running out of her room within minutes, only to be proven wrong. It was quiet, peaceful, no trouble in sight.

I’m making massive progress today.

An hour passed, then another. Rio and Mina returned to the living room. Mina’s eyes were, for some inexplicable reason, shining with confidence.

“I’m a smart kid! I can do anything if I put my mind to it!” Whatever Rio did worked; Mina seemed ready to take on the world.

Rio stood beside her, gently patting her head. “You did great today, Mina.”

“Thanks, teach!”

Teach? Yuuki looked back and forth between the two.

Both of them had genuine smiles adorning their faces. Seeing Mina this obedient left Yuuki deeply impressed. It was quite the sharp contrast from the person she'd jokingly refer to as Yue.

"Living up to the name, I see. Seatmate breaker."

"Again, what does that even mean?"

"It means you're good at bending others to your will, carrot and stick in hand."

"I-I just happened to recall my little brother. He used to be a lot like Mina back in the day."

"The smile helps too. Gives you that gentle older sister vibe."

"C-Can you stop with that already? Mina's a gifted kid, she just never put the work in." Rio touched Mina's hair, as if trying to hide her faintly flushed cheeks.

Praised yet again, Mina double fist pumped. "I'm a genius! A genius, ya hear! Prepare a meal worthy of my genius, Yukkie!"

"Gyudon?"

"Ayeeeeeee!" She yelled out as if releasing all that built up energy.

Well, whatever helps her take her studies more seriously. Yuuki thought.

***

Meanwhile, that same afternoon, Yui's room.

"Take this! And that!"

Yui was all by herself, gaming.

She was about to finally get some studying in, only for a single DM from Mina to condemn her to a fate of neverending practice. *"Rio came over today. She's a Bash Bros god!"*

The moment she saw it Yui went, "She's what?!"

She had actually asked Rio to teach her after school and was, shockingly, refused. It was an abrupt request, true, but Rio had never turned her down before. With comments like "Sorry, Yui. It's... for your own good." there was clearly something fishy going on.

To think that she was gaming over at Yuuki's. As Yui wracked her head at the abrupt turn of events, Mina shot her another DM.

"She tutored me too. Rio's the best teach ever!"

Teach, she says. What about the kind, gentle Yui? Looks like I need to break her in. I should bring her a cookie next time around. In any case,

how did things turn out this way?

Yui had a ton of questions but, first and foremost, she had to know who invited who.

"How did Yuuki talk her into coming?"

"He called her his lover."

"Pfff!" Yui blew air out her mouth and nose at once.

As she hastily wiped the snot off her face with a tissue, Mina sent her a follow up text. *"Jk."*

"Lol. Good one."

I lied, it wasn't a good one. Mina, you and your silly little jokes. Despite her cool response, Yui was starting to get paranoid. *The fact that Mina's joking about this is bad. I need to remind her that I, big sister Yui, am her brother's gf.*

"If Rio's 'teach' then what am I?"

"Uhh, Yue?"

"You meant big sister Yui? :)"

Yui added a smiley face just because. Its purpose remained unclear.

"Hmm, you don't really have big sister energy. You have, well, Yui energy."

Yui wasn't sure if Mina was complimenting or insulting her. *She has to be messing with me, right?*

"Yuukie said Rio got me that panda plush. He also said you couldn't get it."

Just had to sneak that last part in, didn't you, Yuuki?

Mina then sent her a giggling sticker, Yui squeezing her fingers against her phone. *"You were the first one to go 'let's get this for Mina' though. Thanks, Yui. Love you!"*

M-My heart. O, the preciousness. A true angel. How could you get angry at this innocent little thing…

Yui typed up a reply, her fingers vigorously hopping about. *"Love you too, Mina. Let me pet you. Good girl. How about a kiss as well?"*

"I think I'll pass."

Why do you both have to be like that? Yui felt like immediately deleting the message but it was already too late.

"Do it to Yukkie instead…"

"In due time. In due time, little one."

"Hmm? Are you... embarrassed?"

Mina sent her a pointing and laughing sticker this time around. Yui went quiet, her grip tightening once more.

"Rio's so good at Bash Bros even Yuukie was all like 'You're amazing, Rio!'. Don't see that everyday."

Yui had no idea Rio was good at video games.

Didn't she say they were for children? Maybe this "pretending to dislike something you actually don't" thing was the play all along. I mean it got a reaction out of Yuuki. Yuuki.

"That makes you the worst one. By a mile."

Yui typed "Talk more shit and I'll bury you" before quickly deleting it. *"Sucks to be me, haha."* She sent instead, closing Line.

Earlier Yui put on the "aren't I cute when I get salty over losing at a video game" act and it appeared to have no effect on Yuuki. Yet his reaction to Rio was extremely positive.

Does he... have a thing for pro gamer girls?

To bounce back, Yui had to put on a show of absolute, unconditional power. If she, a trash mob in Yuuki's eyes, were to pull an upset over Rio, the resulting shock would be guaranteed to change this perception.

Yui, sitting at her desk after just placing Rio's notes down, tossed her pen aside, picking up the controller and booting up Bash Bros.

And so, back where we left off.

"First I go *bam*. Then I go *po*–"

My Maki senses are tingling! Yui ripped her eyes off the TV, whipping her head to the left. *Nothing. Then she must be ri-- left! No... still nothing. Maybe my Maki senses are o–*

"What're you doing?"

Yui jumped in her chair. She whipped her head around, only to see Maki staring weirdly at her from the door.

"I see you've awoken to your psychic powers."

"My what?"

Maki approached Yui cautiously, kneeling down right beside her. "You're playing a video game, really? Aren't midterms just around the corner?"

"Some battles you can't afford to lose, Maki."

"It's just a video game…"

So long as no one took her seriously, there was no path forward for Yue. She had her pride too. Then there was Yuuki and Rio. The two were highly suspect.

What if she's... after Yuuki too? What if it's not Yuuki -> Rio but Rio -> Yuuki? The thought reared its ugly head. *Not good. Very not good.*

"Inviting her over to his place... that's cheating!"

"Quite the accusation, despite you not even dating."

"Wh-What do you know? You have no idea what I'm talking about."

"Your rival, right? The one you brought up the other day. Uphill battle, huh?"

Uphill? Upmountain, you mean? Scwew me. I don't stand a c-c-chance.

From what Yui had gathered, Rio had no shortcomings. Looks? Check. Smarts? Check. Athletic ability? Checkity check.

She wasn't the most agreeable but that was more a strength if anything, not a shortcoming.

"If a bird has no shortcomings, make some."

"What? Tsk tsk tsk, you don't get it, do you? You have to compliment the enemy."

"What do you mean?"

"He'll see you complimenting others and think 'wow, what a nice girl.' You feel me?"

I feel you.

Yui, itching to test the new strategy out and do a little bit of probing, sent Yuuki a DM.

"I heard professor Rio swung by your place today." She waited, yet there was no response. Worried that she might've come off too vague, Yui nervously sent him a follow-up DM. *"Rio's amazing, isn't she? Getting Mina to study."*

Yuuki responded after a bit. *"She is, yeah."*

"She's smart, pretty, athletic too."

"Sure is."

That's it? All that did was raise Rio up even more. As if Ms. Flawless needed buffing. I've been set up.

Yui thought she'd give Maki a piece of her mind, only for her to immediately withdraw saying she had to take a bath.

I need to debuff her, but how? There has to be something incriminating. Think Yui, think.

"Rio's a surprisingly big eater. I shared my bento with her, right? She absolutely demolished it."

"Girls with an appetite are the best."

Yui had unwittingly dug her grave deeper. Although in doing so, she did acquire an unexpected piece of info.

Into big eaters, are we?

"You know, I like to bust out the ol' soda and large chips while reading manga myself sometimes."

"Ew."

Why ew? Not into junk food? No, focus. What else is there?

"Is it just me or can Rio get a little angry sometimes?"

"I think anger is a necessary response at times."

"Yes, exactly. I can go into angry mode too. If the situation calls for it, of course."

"Like losing at a video game?"

What kind of loser rages at a video game?

Noticing that she'd been self-debuffing for some time now, Yui's fingers stopped. *Trying to bring Rio down was a terrible mistake. I can't. I can't anymore.*

"It's more fun watching you play though. You seem very passionate."

Hmmm. Mmhmm. Yui stared at the words on screen, a smile creeping up her face.

"You got this." She hyped herself up, turning back to the TV and picking up the controller.

Chapter Nine

The Yes Ticket Part 2

Fast forward a few days later. Midterms had finally begun.

Whatever Rio did to Mina worked wonders. She told Yuuki she'd be busy studying and proceeded to lock herself away in her room. This combined with Rio's notes allowed Yuuki to get some really efficient studying in.

The three major midterms took place on the very first day, making it by far the most important.

Yuuki went to bed early. He got to school with time to spare, sitting down at his desk. The classroom felt a little quieter than usual.

Yui would normally initiate conversation around this point but she was too busy furiously flipping back and forth through her notes.

She was awfully absorbed in this process, so Yuuki just kind of leaned in from the side and asked, "Are those Rio's notes?"

"Shut up. I'm trying to focus!"

Yui seemed borderline frantic, yet she only had about twenty minutes until the first midterm.

The final push, huh. Awfully frantic for all your bluster these past few days.

After homeroom ended, everyone moved to the desk corresponding to their student number. Yuuki was at the very front of the middle row while Yui was at the very back, so he had no way of keeping tabs on her.

He thought he heard her muttering "I'm screwed. I'm screwed. I'm…" as she passed by at one point but Yuuki decided to focus on the test sheet in front of him.

***

Once all three midterms were done and over with, the classroom went back to its usual volume levels.

While his classmates shared their thoughts on the midterms, Yuuki went back to his usual desk.

All three felt surprisingly easy considering how little time he had put in. It was all thanks to Rio's notes, which perfectly captured all the important bits. That being said, it was only the first day. He couldn't take it easy as more midterms awaited after the weekend.

Yui stumbled over to her desk as Yuuki packed his stuff back into his bag, so he naturally asked, “How’d you do?”

“F-F-Fine. I did fine...” Yui said, nodding repeatedly. Her face, however, was turned away, her gaze desperately avoiding Yuuki’s. Actually, her gaze was all over the place, suspiciously so. Yui then, oddly, started packing her stuff right away. “I have studying to do. So... yeah.”

“Hmm? Not going to ask Rio for help?”

“R-Rio has nothing to do with this!” She snarled, seemingly set off by the word Rio. “Hmph.” Yui grabbed her bag. “Rio this, Rio that, how about you go Rio yourself.” She said whatever that meant, leaving the classroom.

***

After finally finishing all the midterms off, it was back to regularly scheduled classes.

During midterms, Yuuki and Yui, being multiple desks apart at times, coupled with the latter’s abrupt display of fighting spirit (?), the two spoke very little. It felt a bit odd as Yuuki’d either meet up with Yui on an almost daily basis or exchange DMs with her.

Yui herself would probably say she was purposefully avoiding needless interaction as they were smack dab in the middle of a heated battle. It also appeared she was under the impression that Yuuki and Rio had formed some sort of secret pact, which wasn’t even necessarily wrong, so who could really blame her.

Rio being Rio couldn’t shut up about saving Yui. Yuuki, meanwhile, wanted nothing more than to just get through midterms in one piece.

Although, once midterms were over, he did wish to do something about those two’s recently strained relationship.

All three major midterm papers came back in one go that day. First up was English: Eighty Five points. Not too shabby, by Yuuki standards.

“How’d you do?” He asked as Yui returned to her seat with her answer sheet in hand. She didn’t respond, staring sullenly at her desk.

Yui had folded a third of the bottom half up. She had also folded the corner where the score was placed.

Wondering if she was perhaps making a paper airplane, Yuuki asked again. “Yui, you?”

“Tonkatsu curry.”

“Points.”

Yui froze up, eyes locked on the corner of her desk, her mind seemingly wandering the cafeteria.

Yuuki stared at her, waiting for an answer, but beside the occasional cheek twitch, she showed no signs of recovery.

Seemingly choosing to ignore Yuuki, Yui didn’t say a single word the entire first period.

The Spanish and Math midterms came back one after another, making that three in total. Yui went into a similar catatonic state both times, as if their match had completely vanished from her mind.

Growing tired of her ignoring him, Yuuki addressed Yui as soon as the third period ended. “So, how about our match? Are we waiting for all our midterms to come back or what?”

Yui ignored him as she quietly snuck her answer sheet into her bag. Yuuki extended his arm, trying to snatch it out of her hands.

Yui pulled her arm back in a panic, ripping the corner with the test score off. Flashing before Yuuki’s eyes in the leftmost position was the number five. “Ah...”

As he looked Yui in the eyes amidst the awkward atmosphere, she abruptly frowned, falling onto her desk. “Hnnnnnn!” She began groaning and kicking.

Yui’s hissy fit eventually settled, yet her face remained buried in her desk. Yuuki gently tapped her on the shoulder.

Yui slowly lifted herself up, gazing at Yuuki with eyes of hope. “Yuuki...”

“I got a ninety in math. Show me your English next.”

“Are you the devil?” Yui’s face went back into serious mode.

Yuuki didn’t care, leaning in to get a closer look. “That’s fifty, how much? Need to add everything up.”

“Fine! You win, okay? Now stop. Please stop!” Yui put her hands together, bowing profusely; complete capitulation.

In a rather anticlimactic surrender from Yui, Yuuki won by default.

She had no shot of winning regardless but it raised the question-- did all her midterms go similarly poorly? *What’ve you been doing all this time?*

“You sure? Okay. Ticket, please.”

“T-Thicket?”

“You know what I meant.”

Yui then abruptly opened her bag, taking out a tupperware container and silently holding it out.

Yuuki wasn't sure what to think, so he pushed it away.

"No? There are delicious cookies inside."

"Why cookies? You're trying to worm your way out of this, aren't you?"

The fact that she had it on her meant she, at the very least, expected this particular outcome.

Yui, unfazed, began rummaging through her bag again. "Oh, alright. Here... take it." She said, predictably busting out a concert ticket.

"I knew it."

"It's luxury."

"And?" Yuuki calmly shot her distractions down.

Just as he thought she'd finally given up, Yui suddenly put on her famous teasing face. "I see. So you studied tirelessly, day and night, just to get your hands on that yes ticket, hmm?"

"Not really, no."

Yuuki's success was mostly thanks to his opponent self-imploding and, of course, Rio's notes. The fact that Yui wasn't able to score well despite having access to the exact same notes made him wonder if she had studied at all.

"Anyway. Ticket, please."

"Okay, okay. Jeez." Yui grumbled, almost like the whole thing *wasn't* her idea. She ripped an empty page out of her colorful notepad, hastily scribbling the word "yes" onto it. "A high school girl's yes ticket. Just saying it feels weird; has a real criminal ring to it."

"Your idea, not mine." Yuuki put out his hand, urging her on.

Yui still appeared hesitant. She shot Yuuki an upward glance before shoving the ticket into his hand.

Yuuki, afraid it might be cursed, carefully held it out in the light, gazing upon it. *The fabled yes ticket…* It was comically crude and easily forgeable. He'd definitely throw it in the trash if he found it lying on the ground.

The plan was to tear the ticket right up in Yui's face... but Yuuki thought it'd be better to discuss it with Rio some more. If he did go through with it, Yui would almost certainly snap.

She'd probably throw another yes ticket at me. Yui, the dreaded ticket thrower. A smile made its way up Yuuki's face.

Yui appeared to have noticed. "W-Why are you smiling?"

“Secret.”

“D-Don’t get any weird ideas, okay? Abusing the yes ticket is not cool.”

“Weird ideas? Like what?”

Yuuki asked with a straight face, turning in her direction. Yui’s face turned pink right before his eyes as she fell deathly silent. Yuuki stared, waiting for her to say something.

“F-Forget it!” Yui got up from her seat, storming out of the classroom.

She returned to her desk sometime later, composed yet clearly still a little on edge. Yui glanced his way every so often, appearing to be in a state of suspense. Yuuki glanced back at her, only for Yui to immediately give him the cold shoulder.

After repeating this exchange a couple more times, she began restlessly tapping her desk out of boredom, like an addict going through a bad withdrawal.

Yuuki pulled the ticket out, stared at it and put it back inside his pocket a few times.

“Oi.”

“Yes?”

“Cut it.”

It was almost like she wanted to get the whole thing over with quickly. Yuuki, however, had no such intention. Thanks to Yui, unaware of Yuuki’s true intent, kept her guard up, a weird tension hung between the two.

***

Lunch break. Yuuki, having contacted Rio beforehand via phone, went to meet up with her at the usual spot.

Yes ticket tucked away in his pocket, he made his way down the familiar path where Rio nervously awaited him.

“Y-Yui’s yes ticket...”

Rio took the ticket, gazing intently at the hastily scribbled yes, her hands slightly shaking. What looked like an ordinary scribbled over piece of paper she held like a winning lottery ticket.

“The plan was to tear it up right in front of her face, right?”

“A-Actually, now that I really, really think about it, she took the time and effort to make this. It’d be too cruel.”

“She made it in like five seconds.”

The “effort” put in was exactly zero. Despite quite literally holding the yes ticket within her palm, Rio seemed a bit down.

“Something wrong?”

“I think Yui hates me.”

“Why’s that?”

“I DMed her earlier and she...” Rio paused.

Maybe they had some kind of falling out and now Yui stopped responding to her DMs.

“She took ten minutes longer than usual to respond. She left me on read; she never does that.”

“Let’s try to be a little more patient, okay?”

It appeared to be nothing more than minor paranoia.

Counting the exact time it took for someone to respond was already a little weird but Rio also had the intimidating “insta replier” vibes.

“What’d you send her?”

“I asked ‘How was it?’ to which she responded ‘Piece of cake’ to which I replied ‘Sure was.’”

“Ooh, not good.”

“I-I didn’t know. Now things between us are weird and awkward. B-But with this...” Rio gulped as she gazed upon the yes ticket. She appeared to be lost in thought for a second before abruptly sticking it out just short of Yuuki’s nose. “Y-You keep it. Using this to earn her friendship is heresy.”

“Didn’t we agree to tear it up right in front of her face?”

Rio’s true intentions had briefly raised their ugly head. *Seems like she noticed there’s a much quicker path than ’exercising’ the seatmate killer.*

“I’ve been thinking about it and, if Yui only befriended me as part of her game, fixing her would mean she stops giving me attention. Maybe keeping things the way they are is... for the better.”

Not that she gave her much attention to begin with. The thought crossed Yuuki’s mind, never to be uttered as it was just that, a thought.

“A-Anyway, just take it, okay?” Rio said, shoving the yes ticket into his palm, her former “I’m going to save Yuuki!” enthusiasm nowhere to be seen.

Having second thoughts this late into the game simply wasn’t going to cut it.

Yuuki waved the ticket around. “What do we do with this then?”

“Wh-What do we do with it?” She responded to his question with a question, an awkward stare off ensuing.

***

Yuuki made it back to his desk, just as the bell went off.

Yui conveniently returned to her seat at about the same time, so Yuuki immediately whispered,

"There's something I need to tell you." Yui cautiously looked over.

"Y-Yes?"

"I'm thinking of turning in my ticket."

Yui's face slightly stiffened. It appeared the word 'ticket' had become something of a trigger for her.

"Come to the backyard after school."

"Wh-Why the backyard?"

"It's better if no one sees us... I think."

"M-Mmhmm? Awfully dramatic, aren't we?" Yui said with a composed smile as she, despite the fact that class was about to start, took her bento out and immediately put it away.

Yui's vivid imagination aside, Yuuki didn't really care where they met, so long as there weren't many people around.

And so, school ended.

"Meet you there." Yuuki said, exiting the classroom. He went down the hall, joining up with Rio in front of grade four's classroom. "It's time."

"A-Are you sure about this?" Rio's face looked awfully pale, her gaze wandering restlessly.

Discussing what if scenarios seemed pointless, so they settled on ripping the ticket right up in Yui's face. This'd stun the seatmate killer, allowing them to persuade her.

Yuuki, however, wanted to make sure Rio knew they were only going to kindly admonish her, not be antagonistic.

"You're making the face again. Smile, come on." Yuuki urged her.

While Rio did manage to muster up a smile, its stiffness, likely due to nerves, made it more creepy than anything.

She then suddenly clutched her stomach. "I-I need to go to the bathroom. Go on without me." Hunched over, Rio briskly walked off.

Yuuki, left with no other options, set off for the meeting spot.

After walking out the entrance, he turned to a different direction than normal. He passed through the school staff parking area on his way to the back yard, greeted by a row of narrow trees and a flower bed.

The grassy backyard formed along the school building. It was excessively long, if not terribly wide. There was no one in the vicinity, only two or three distant silhouettes.

Yuuki leaned against a wall and waited, gazing at the flower bed before him. And yet, no matter how long he waited, there was no sign of Rio.

Right as he pulled his phone out to check in on her, a DM from Rio appeared. *"Tummy hurts. Heading home."*

The classic grade schooler's excuse. Although, to be fair, it did seem like she really had stomach pains earlier, so Yuuki couldn't really fault her. This did, however, completely derail their plan.

It didn't help that Yui was running terribly late. Perhaps she had flaked on him too. It certainly wasn't unthinkable.

What am I even doing here… A sudden wave of existential dread washed over Yuuki. *Maybe I should "tummy hurts" my way out of here too.* He thought just as a shadow stretched across the ground beside him.

"Y-Yo." Yui said, raising her arm in the air as Yuuki turned to her. Yui seemed like her usual self... at a glance. Her face was weirdly stiff, her voice muttery.

"Aren't you early."

"S-So, what do you want from me?"

Yui urged him on, her voice slightly shrill. She played around with the tips of her fingers, giving him a nervous yet somewhat expecting upward glance.

As Yuuki just kind of stared back at her, Rio's timid look as she said the words "if Yui only befriended me as part of her game" flashed in his mind.

Yuuki fumbled around in his pocket, making sure the fabled yes ticket was safe and secure. He then abruptly pulled it out, held it out in front of Yui and said, "Here, now spend a whole day with Rio sometime."

"Huh?" Yui's fingers froze right then and there. After a brief pause, she, in a low voice, said, "Why her again?"

"What do you mean why? It's my yes ticket. I can use it however I like."

Yui's face didn't seem happy with his answer whatsoever. So not happy, in fact, that she suddenly hung her head. "You brought me out here just for this?"

"No, I just didn't want people hearing us talk about yes tickets and all that."

Especially not Keitarou and Sonada. That and giving Rio and Yui an opportunity to talk things out but alas.

"Rio was supposed to be here too but her stomach started hurting so, yeah."

"Here you go again. Rio this, Rio that, Rio everything." Yui growled, her body shaking.

Something seemed off about her, so Yuuki asked, "Is my request too much?"

"N-No! I-It's just weird that Rio suddenly enters the conversation for no good reason!"

Yuuki didn't understand what was so weird about it exactly, going into full head tilt mode. "What's so weird about it?"

"W-What's weird is that... " Yui closed her eyes before suddenly shouting, "Is that you're so obsessed with Rio you've been completely neglecting me!"

Yuuki gasped, his eyes widening at her sharp tone of voice. *Why the abrupt shouting?* Yui made it sound like Yuuki was somehow the bad guy here.

Yuuki couldn't make any sense of it all, his head remaining firmly tilted. "Neglecting?"

Like a house pet? He thought but that was almost definitely not what she meant. *What counts as neglect exactly? I go through great lengths for you, not to mention interacting with you literally this very moment.*

Yui lifted her head, her gaze wandering from left to right, her mouth flapping as if she had just said something she really shouldn't have. "N-No, I, uhh, I was just..."

"You were just?"

"J-Just... just kidding." Yui gently tapped the top of her head with both fists, tilting it as she stuck her tongue out. Overwhelmed by a rapid series of cryptic actions, Yuuki simply stood there, frozen. "Just kidding?" She repeated, this time with a question mark at the end.

Yui had finally gotten on Yuuki's nerves. *Relax. You're playing right into her hands. Take it nice and easy.*

"Sorry, Yui." He said, genuinely meaning it. His frustration had morphed into feelings of pity. "I didn't know you felt that way."

"Yuuki..."

"I genuinely didn't know. I really and truly... didn't know."

“I think I get it.”

“But what I do know is that I just can’t take my mind off you, Yui.”

“Eh?”

Yuuki once again realized that, while Rio certainly had her issues, Yui’s were way more serious. Rio’s disturbed mind could also be directly traced back to the seatmate killer-- the root of all evil.

Upon those words, Yui’s heavy eyes widened, lighting up with color. The corners of her mouth started raising as well, only for her to hastily make a frowny face.

“Th-Then why can’t you shut up about Rio!”

“Well, because she asked me for advice on improving your guys’ relationship.”

“Eh?”

Yuuki proceeded to briefly explain how Rio ate alone, mentioning the effort she put in behind the scenes to get closer to Yui, among other things.

Yui tilted her head this time around. “What? We used to eat together all the time last year but you’re telling me she... no, it can’t be. You’re lying.”

“Ask her yourself, if you don’t believe me.”

“No thanks. That’d be way too awkward.”

It appeared even Yui didn’t have the guts to go up and ask “how does it feel to eat all by yourself?”

Yui knit her brow, seemingly oblivious to Rio’s subtle attempts at grabbing her attention. “Why didn’t she say anything?”

“I think you had plenty of time to notice.”

“I-I was dealing with a lot of stuff, okay? Actually, why didn’t you tell me earlier!?”

“Because she more or less told me not to... and because I’d feel bad doing it. Now I don’t really care anymore.”

Yuuki thought he’d let Rio do it on her own but she kind of just went around in circles making zero progress. Scratch that, she had made *negative* progress. Yuuki felt he had to do something before things got completely out of hand.

“At least... at least that’s all there was to it!” Yui, made aware of Rio’s plight, seemed... happy. Her face lit up, her drab mood vanishing without a trace.

Actual Lyucifer. Yuuki thought as she shoved the ticket into her palm.

“Hang out with her, okay?”

“You don’t need to use your yes ticket for that! We’ll hang out tomorrow! Hang out like no one’s hung out before! Rio has this cold aura but she really is moe, isn’t she?”

“Give it back then.”

Yui’s smile instantly faded as she ripped the ticket into two. “Oops, hand slipped.”

“Uh-huh, sure it did.”

“We don’t offer refunds, sorry.” Yui said with a cordial look, mimicking a receptionist. She then put on her trademark smirk, waving the two yes ticket pieces in either hand. “You seem desperate, Yuuki. What could you’ve possibly wanted to use this for, hmm?”

“Another lap pillow, maybe?”

“Go buy one from a store!” Yui crumpled the ticket up, throwing it at him.

The paper ball bounced off of Yuuki’s head, falling to the ground. “The dreaded ticket thrower...”

“What’d you say?”

“I’m going home. Too tired for this.”

“W-Wait! Y-You sure? You’re giving up your yes ticket just like that?”

“I’m good. It’s not worth the trouble.”

“N-Not worth the... you’re calling the opportunity to have your way with me not worth the trouble?!”

Does she want me to “have my way” with her? No, it’s just the seatmate killer talking. Yuuki thought, setting off home as Yui yelled to his back.

Chapter Ten

Yui vs Rio

Yui DMed Rio afterward, asking if she wanted to hang out tomorrow. Her abrupt request was met with an enthusiastic yes. *I'm a girl of my word.*

The next day. Early Saturday afternoon.

After having a light lunch at a cafe by the nearest station, Yui invited Rio over to her place. Maki was out with her friends, while her parents had driven off somewhere.

"Forgive the intrusion." Rio said nonetheless, before coming inside.

They then headed up to Yui's room, situated on the second floor. Once she placed her hand on the doorknob, Yui abruptly stopped. "Just so we're clear, this says 'Yui's Room'. Does it say 'Otaku's Room'? No, no it doesn't. Only the chosen few may set foot inside the forbidden holy land."

"The chosen few?"

"It's not like I never invited you over because I was too scared you'd find out I'm an otaku, because I'm not."

Looking back on it, Yui had no memory of ever inviting another person over to her place. Granted, Yui didn't have anyone to invite when she was little but she did distinctly remember being resistant to the idea regardless.

Perhaps this shy, secretive side of me never really went away, remaining part of my subconscious mind to this very day. Yui thought, her nerves suddenly spiking. *Crap, why won't you stop pounding? It's not even a guy, it's just a friend…* Yui was reminded of how Yuuki had casually asked her to come over to his place. *I wonder if he felt the same way on the inside. He did wander around in his pajamas, so probably not.* Laughter welled up as she recalled the dumb look on his face.

Her mood having lightened, Yui threw the door open, entering inside.

Rio set foot inside immediately after. She stood in place, curiously examining the layout of the room, the posters on the walls. It was weird but she'd been acting strange since the second they met up.

Rio was wearing the same dress from when they went out last time, her legs bare. Whether conscious or not, her choice of clothing necessitated a high level of confidence in one's looks. Although, Rio did seem impartial to stares from the opposite sex.

"Cute dress. Your favorite?"

“It is. It’s also my only one.”

“What?”

“Our school uniform is usually good enough, don’t you agree?”

“I-I guess…”

Yui couldn’t quite grasp if Rio was being serious or not but it felt like something she shouldn’t stick her nose in, so she dismissed it.

Yui, in contrast, sported shorts and a hoodie, figuring they’d be spending most of their time back at her place anyway.

“Don’t be shy. Have a seat.” Yui said, offering her a cushion.

Rio sat down, folding her legs back in a W-pose. Yui, meanwhile, sat on the edge of her bed, her eyes wandering over to Rio’s knee area.

“I get how guys feel now.”

“Sorry?”

The unintentionally seductive type, huh? Well, maybe not “seductive” seductive, but it adds to her moe appeal, definitely. Yui smirked on the inside.

Rio’s gaze restlessly wandered from here to there before eventually stopping at the packed bookshelf. “I-It’s so full. Mind if I take a look?”

“Uhh, sure. Be my guest.”

Rio leaned over her knees and began intensely staring at the bookshelf. Unintentional butt exhibition aside, Yui felt oddly embarrassed, as if Rio had just uncovered her deepest and darkest secrets.

“Y-You’d be surprised to know that I’m actually an indoor gal. Shocker, right?” Yui explained.

Rio didn’t seem to hear her, enamored with the bookshelf. “Comedy DVDs. Here we’ve got…”

“D-D-Don’t stare too much. It’s embarrassing.”

Expecting something like this, she had hid all the truly spicy stuff in the back. Yui, being something of an omnivore, had maybe one or two BL manga stashed somewhere in there. That was it. Yet, it still felt like Rio’s sharp gaze was going to uncover something bad any second now.

“L-Let’s play a game! Come, come.”

Yui dragged Rio away, sitting her down on a cushion before the TV and booting up the console. Her game of choice was, of course, the good ol’ reliable *Bash Bros*. If Yuuki was to be believed, Rio practiced the game just so she could play with Yui. *How cute.*

“This is all I have, unfortunately.”

Yui sat down beside Rio, handing her a small, unwieldy controller. There was no such thing as "honor" in competitive gaming. The battle had already begun.

"I'm getting a little nervous. Hope I don't mess up too much." Oblivious to Yui's twisted machinations, Rio gripped the controller, staring stiff-faced at the TV screen.

Yui waited for Rio to lock in her character first before picking a soft-counter out of her pool of characters. Mina had told her all about Rio's skills but as Yui had improved tremendously since their last encounter, she could probably easily take Mina on in her current state. Rio likely wasn't going to be much tougher but being careful didn't hurt.

As soon as the match started, Yui got some distance between them, fidgeting left and right as she waited for Rio to make her move.

"Narito's a pretty nice guy, isn't he?"

"Huh? W-What makes you say that?" Yui's fingers froze at the abrupt mention of Yuuki's name.

Where is this coming from? Yui thought as Rio's character went in for an attack. She hastily regripped her controller.

"He looks like he doesn't care, but he actually cares a lot."

Don't tell me she fell for him as he helped her out with her problems. For a second Yui thought about mentioning how, yes, she did know that Yuuki was a softie deep down, but she promptly reconsidered. *No need to improve her opinion of him further.*

"D-Does he? Yuuki doesn't even sound human to me sometimes."

"Don't say that. He cares about you, Yui."

"Eh?" Yui's fingers froze again as Rio landed a powerful attack, knocking her character way back. "Why, you!" She shot Rio a quick glare before quickly returning her gaze back to the screen.

"A-And... I care about you too."

It appeared her strategy was to divert Yui's attention through deep conversation. *How underhanded. Guess I'll just stop listening then.* Yui focused all her attention on the game.

"I know life's been tough. I know it hurts. But you have to stop, Yui."

"Mmhmm, that's nice."

Yui was getting completely blown out, despite Rio glancing in her direction, seemingly unfocused on the match at hand. Her training all for naught, Yui was on the verge of getting KO'd.

“T-Timeout! I think my buttons stopped working! The controller’s blinking!”

“You have to stop, Yui. Okay? Drop the seatmate killer nonsense.”

It was then that Rio’s character suddenly stopped moving. Yui took the opportunity to deliver a powerful blow, sending it out of bounds.

“1-0! You saw that, right? Man, I’m good!”

“Are you listening?”

“Hmm? Listening to what?”

“I said drop the seatmate killer nonsense.”

Seatmate killer?

Next thing she knew, Rio had set the game aside completely, with a serious look in her eyes. Yui tilted her head at the cryptic combination of words, only to immediately shift her attention back to the game when Rio’s character respawned.

“Making up this whole yes ticket thing too. It’s not okay, Yui. Show yourself some respect. This weird game of yours isn’t worth it.”

“Huh? You’ve gotta be kidding me?!”

“S-Sorry. I didn’t mean for it to sound like an order…”

“What? No, focus.”

Just as Yui thought she had the upper hand, Rio served her a seemingly impossible counter. Expecting a shit eating grin from Rio, Yui instead got a concerned look.

“All it did was earn you the title of seatmate killer.”

“Wait a second. What’s a ‘seatmate killer’?” Yui's curiosity had finally gotten the better of her; she had never heard the term before.

“You, Yui. You play this game where you try to ‘win’ the affection of your seatmates.“

“Who told you that exactly?”

“Priest... no, Narito.”

Her worst fear had come true. Yui knit her brow. “Yuuki did?”

“Yes. I already thought you were walking on thin ice, but then he told me something about how whoever won the midterm battle got to have their way with the loser. That’s going way too far, Yui.”

Why does she know about the yes ticket? How much did that weasel tell her? It almost sounds like I have a thing for him and doing this to get his attention. Not necessarily wrong, per se, but snitching on me to an outsider is against the rules. Well, my rules, at least.

“T-The, uhh, the yes ticket thing was Yuuki’s idea, I think. Probably. Maybe.”

“And the bento?”

“Bento?”

“Narito showed me the bento you gave him.”

So that’s why he wasn’t in class; he was too busy telling Rio how I’m playing games with my seatmates or whatever.

Yui, however, was painfully aware how her actions could be interpreted in such a light, especially with evidence as damning as the bento. That being said, she couldn’t just scream “it’s not a game!” and call it a day. *Quick, think of an excuse.*

“Th-Those were just... leftovers, yeah, leftovers. I just kind of dumped all my leftover pink rice and bass.”

“Wh-What? Then what about L*yu*cifer?”

“Who’s L*yu*cifer and why do they sound like a Wind God Fist user? Anyway, I have no clue what this ‘seatmate killer’ business is about.”

Why that little... giving me weird names!

Rio’s fingers froze completely upon hearing this. Yui took the opportunity to unleash a bash attack, when suddenly, “Na… Naritoooooooooo!” Rio screamed as the letters KO flashed across the screen.

Yui’s character ate a nasty counter, flying out of bounds. “Huuuuuuuh?!” Yui screamed alongside her before quickly noticing something was up with Rio.

“Y-You okay Rio?! What’s with the screaming?”

“I fell for his lies! Damn you, Naritooooo! I should’ve known better. Seatmate killer... What was I thinking?” Her teeth gritted, Rio stood up, tossing away her controller. She then clenched her fists, shaking furiously. “I’ll never forgive him! How could I’ve been so blind?!”

“W-What are you talking about?”

“That man’s a menace, Yui. For as long as I draw breath, I promise he’ll never come near you again!”

“R-Rio? Please, chill. Chill!”

“Why I oughta break into his house and–”

“I said chill!”

“Oof?!” Rio went as Yui caught her forehead with her finger, pushing her back onto the cushion.

“Good girl. Now, stay. Stay!”

Rio huffed as Yui petted her head, patted her shoulders while handing her the controller back. This calmed Rio down a little.

What's got her so worked up? I bet Yuuki poisoned her mind with his usual nonsense. Lyucifer, seatmate killer; How do you even come up with this? A little payback is in order, I think. Yui sat down in front of Rio.

"Yuuki's a sad, sad creature, you see. He... doesn't feel things the same way we do, as you've probably noticed. When we became seatmates I thought 'this guy's off his rocker' and swore to show him human kindness. So, yeah, try not to go hard on the guy, okay?"

She said in a soft, admonishing tone. *It's the truth… probably the truth, maybe.*

"If he does or says anything weird, just, try to keep a cool head."

"I-I see now. Such... kindness. You're no L*yu*cifer; you're an angel. Angel Yui."

"Call me Yuihweh."

"Apologies, Yuihweh." Rio breathed in, gazing at Yui with eyes of admiration.

Phew, close call. Yui wiped the sweat off her brow, having successfully calmed Rio down.

"Let's take a break. I'll bring drinks." She said, exiting the room.

As Yui went down to the first floor, she remembered Yuuki's face as he brushed off a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have his way with her as "not worth the trouble".

Treating me like the literal devil behind my back. Two can play that game, Yuuki. Two can play that game. Yuihweh thought, a sinister grin spreading across her face.

Chapter Eleven

A Date With the Devil

Later that night, Yuuki got a DM from Yui.

Yuuki laid on the living room couch, watching a movie. He pulled out his phone, thinking of hitting the sack, when he happened to notice the DM notification.

"What did you do to Rio?"

"You tell me." He replied, his phone suddenly switching to the call screen.

Yuuki accidentally declined the call out of sheer surprise. Another one came immediately after, which he this time accepted.

"You brainwashed her. I know you did." Was the first thing he heard. Yui's tone was intense right out the gate.

"I don't remember brainwashing her, no. Oh and, how'd it go? Are you the bestest of buddies now?"

"Always have been. Anyway, you free tomorrow? Midterms are over, of course you are. Meet me at the station."

Surprisingly forceful by Yui standards. She also seems angry, judging by the tone.

Yuuki didn't have anything planned, as Yui correctly guessed. There was just one problem.

"I don't know. Might be groggy."

"Go to bed. Go now."

"Is afternoon okay?"

"Hmm, fine. 1 p.m., then."

Yuuki asked her why she wanted to meet up but Yui refused to elaborate, insisting that all would be explained tomorrow.

"Goodnight, then." He said, ending the call.

"Did you just hang up on me?!" She messaged in retaliation.

Yuuki knew they'd be here all day if he responded, so he decided to go to bed instead.

"Was that Yui? Why'd you hang up on her so fast?" Mina, who had been playing with her phone next to him, asked as he was about to get off the sofa. "No need to be embarrassed just because I'm here."

"I'll be leaving at 1 p.m. tomorrow."

“Going out on a date, I see. Is it hot in here or is it just me?”

“It’s not really a date.”

“Well, what is it then?” Mina turned her head toward Yuuki, giving him a dubious look.

Yuuki decided to call it a date in the end, to save time explaining. After giving a satisfied nod, Mina slapped her knee as she got off the couch.

“I know! Let’s throw a midterm celebration party tomorrow! Celebrate all our hard work!” Mina, having no hard work to celebrate up until now, had never mentioned anything of the sort. This time, however, she got a ninety two in math and was awfully proud of it. “I even beat you for once.”

“In math.”

Mina liked to bring that up all the time but, besides math, she scored below average on everything, coasting on the cusp of failing, as was custom.

In a way, she did focus on one subject to the detriment of all others, but it was a step up regardless compared to being unable to do even that much. Given how little time she had, Mina did surprisingly well.

“Still, good job. Rio really whipped you into shape, huh?”

“Elder Rio unleashed the power hidden deep inside me.” Mina proudly puffed out her chest.

Rio and Mina exchanged phone numbers afterward and appeared to interact frequently. Rio even came over to their place once to check up on Mina without Yuuki’s knowledge. They spent the whole time shut inside Mina’s room.

“Where would we throw a party? Here?”

“Leave all the planning to Ms. Ninety-two. Don’t worry, I’ll schedule it for after your date.” Mina said as she closed her game and began typing away at her phone, likely DMing Yui. “Hmm, might as well throw in a surprise.”

“A what?” Yuuki peered into Mina’s phone, which she promptly hid.

She’s up to something, I just hope it’s nothing bad.

***

The next day.

Yuuki woke up late, had brunch and prepared for his “date.”

“I’ll be waiting for you two.” Mina said as he went out the door.

Yuuki stifled a sigh as he walked to the roundabout by the station, the same one they met up at on their previous date. There were quite a few

people around, likely owing to the fine weather.

1 p.m. came, yet Yui was still nowhere to be seen.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen minutes passed. Just as Yuuki pulled out his phone to call up Yui, a lone figure stopped before him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Yuuki lifted his head, only to see Yui standing there with her arms pompously crossed.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket, staring back at her completely reactionless. "So, what do you want?" He urged her to get to the point.

Yui silently took something out of her breast pocket, holding it out. "I'm turning this in."

"You what?"

Said something was a familiar crumpled piece of paper with the word yes scribbled over it. Parts of it were taped together. *Is this... the yes ticket?*

Yuuki thought he'd witnessed the demise of the yes ticket when Yui tore, crumpled and threw it at him. But it appeared she later picked it off the ground, evened it out and fixed it up with tape. That much made sense. Why she held it out in front of him saying "I'm turning this in" didn't.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm turning the yes ticket in."

"Turning your yes ticket in?"

"I don't see my name on it. Do you?"

"Now, wait just a second."

Yui's humor was, for the most part, nonsensical but today it was on a whole 'nother level.

Yuuki remained calm, refusing to engage. Yui then rolled the yes ticket up and tried abruptly sticking it up his nose, so he swatted her arm away.

"Stop resistin', will ya?" Yui pouted, appearing to be in a terrible mood.

Yuuki, however, wasn't in the mood to be treated terribly himself. "You've been acting weird since yesterday. Did something happen?"

"Did something hap-- Of course something happened. Rio completely flipped her lid because of something you said forcing me to calm her. I even treated her like a goddess afterward, okay? I gave her the pudding I had saved for later, okay?"

"And that's why you're mad?"

"Look. That alone? Whatever. What gets me is that you and Rio called me names like 'L*yu*cifer' behind my back. I can't stand that kind of thing. Don't

test me, okay? Or I'll shoot beams out my eyes, the unblockable kind." Yui brought her face in closer, her eyes shooting open.

Rio came up with the whole "L*yu*cifer" thing but it was now somehow Yuuki's fault. What went on between the two, Yuuki had no way of knowing, but it was likely either a case of Rio jumping to conclusions or Yui's half-assed assumptions causing a misunderstanding.

Trying to calm Yui down a little, Yuuki brought his hand out in front of her face. "Sorry, wasn't trying to insult you or anything. All I feel for you is pity."

"Wasn't trying to insult-- You're doing it right now! Grrr!" Yui growled up in his face, awfully combative.

Upon closer inspection, Yui wore black eyeshadow, her eyes popping out more normal.

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She also wore a black bow, a black blouse, a black skirt with red patterns and black thigh highs. Yui typically dressed in bright colors but today she went full black.

"Weird seeing you in black."

"Figured I'd reveal L*yu*cifer's true form, since apparently I'm *literally* the devil now."

"It suits you. Cute fit."

Yui quickly concealed her mouth as a smile began creeping up her face. She put on a neutral look before removing her hand. "Don't even bother, us demons are immune to flattery."

"Demons? Weren't you L*yu*cifer? Also, didn't you just smile?"

"No? A short burst of air came out my nose. Nothing more."

"Like when people smile?"

Yui stuck her tongue out before quickly pulling it back in. "That's for Rio!" She then punched Yuuki's shoulder.

"Ow, and that?"

"That? That's for making light of the yes ticket." She said, proceeding to slap him across the face with said yes ticket.

"Remember how you said it's 'not worth the effort'? Because I do."

"Surprisingly vindictive, I see."

"Learnt your lesson yet?"

"Of course."

"Show me."

Yui stuck the yes ticket out, bringing the conversation back full circle. Yuuki heaved a heavy sigh, pressured by Yui's intense stare. "Okay, fine."

"That's the spirit!" She said, awfully joyful for the literal devil.

As the kind observer, I suppose I should go along with her antics. So long as it helps improve her mental state, even if in a miniscule way, I'm fine with it. Yuuki thought.

"So, what do you want me to do?"

"Today, my friend, you're going on a date with L*yu*cifer!" Yui enthusiastically declared.

Yuuki tilted his head after a brief pause, asking, "You're using the yes ticket to go on a date... with me?"

"Wh-What? No! We're not going on a 'date' date! We're going on a... pretend date, yes, *pretend* date! Practicing for the real deal, you know?

You're merely a stepping stone, okay?" Yui rapidly fired in a flustered frenzy.

Is it really good practice for the "real deal" if your partner has to do whatever you say? Yuuki thought, choosing to remain silent for his own sanity.

"Alright, let's take it from the top."

"From the top?"

"I'll go 'Sorry, did I keep you waiting?' to which you'll smile and say 'Not at all.'"

"Do I have to? That doesn't sound like a healthy relationship at all."

Yui froze, gazing up. She then put on a creepy grin. "I see you've given it some thought."

"What's with the creepy smile?"

"Very well, feel free to improv."

Yuuki felt like arguing was pointless.

"Stay right where you are." Yui said, disappearing into a crowd of people before popping back out with a smile. "Sorry, did I keep you waiting?"

"You did. You're never on time, Yui. What gives?"

"This relationship is going to turn toxic fast, if you keep this up."

You told me I could improv, so I merely stated objective facts.

Yui turned serious. She placed her hand against her forehead, closed her eyes and sank deep into thought, only to raise her head almost immediately. "Whatever, good enough. Off to our next destination!" She pointed toward the station, marching off by herself.

For all the enthusiasm, the reason behind her tardiness remained unknown. Although, knowing Yui, she probably just couldn't decide if she really wanted to go all black or not.

"Whatcha standin' around for? Get a move on, will ya?" Yui turned back and started nagging.

Yuuki had no choice but to catch up. "Where we going?" He asked, walking beside her.

"Over... there!" She said, pointing at a large department store neighboring the station.

Despite standing out and being situated in a prime location, Yuuki never really went there that much.

"It's rare to see you be so upfront about where you want to go, Yui."

“I’m not Yui, I’m L*yu*cifer. Forget that and you’re dead, gone, toast!”

“I think I like it better this way.”

“Y-You do?” Yui looked over, as if trying to gauge his reaction.

Much preferable to her complaining about my lack of planning again.

“Buckle up then, ‘cause we’re coming in hot!” Yui exclaimed, all hyped up as they entered the store.

While Yuuki curiously looked around, Yui confidently walked over to the escalator. He obediently followed, going up to the third floor.

Yui then got off, spread her arms wide and said, “First up, clothes shopping!”

“I’ll be at the bookstore a floor up if you need me. Lat–”

“Hold it.” Yuuki turned around, only to get his sleeve grabbed. Yui brought her face up close in an intimidating manner. “Where do you think you’re going? You’re supposed to do as I say, remember?”

“But... I don’t need clothes.”

“What’re you, a kid going clothes shopping with his mom? I need you so you can go ‘that’d look great on you’ and ‘you’d look cute in that’, got it?”

“Ah, I see how it is.”

“What’s with the condescending tone?” Yui rattled off, bringing the yes ticket up to Yuuki’s nose. “See this? Want me to stick it up yours? Hmm, tough guy?”

“That’s now how you use a yes ticket.”

Yuuki, preferring not to have a piece of paper stuck up his nose, obediently followed Yui into a clothing shop.

Yui, likely having come here many times before, wandered the place with confidence in her step as she abruptly turned to Yuuki and asked, “Alrighty, what do you think’d look good on me?”

“Try thinking for yourself, for once.”

“Wrong.” Yui said, flashing the yes ticket like some kind of lucky charm. “You’re supposed to say ‘you’d look cute in anything.’”

“Do you ever feel a little dead inside, saying stuff like that?”

“No, never felt more alive.”

“So what you’re telling me is that you’d look cute in a spandex suit? Wow.”

“Keep your dirty thoughts to yourself, please.”

Growing tired of her nagging, Yuuki pointed to a nearby mannequin. “That looks good.”

“Does it? Or did you just pick whatever was closest?”

L*yu*cifer was surprisingly sharp.

Yui gave him a skeptical look as she fell deep into thought in front of the logoed t-shirt and short denim skirt wearing mannequin. “No. This doesn’t really scream Yui to me.”

“What does it scream then?”

“What? Hmm. Mina, maybe?”

Yuuki didn’t really agree. Mina was indifferent to clothing, wearing whatever happened to be on hand. Not like she needed much of a wardrobe anyway, being allergic to going outside. Yet she also, hypocritically enough, liked to give other people crap for their choice of clothing.

“What do you think?”

“Hard to say. Mina rarely ever goes clothes shopping.”

She made Yuuki go buy her panties when her previous pair ripped. Yuuki, of course, ordered them off the internet.

“What clothes does she wear then?”

“She doesn’t... wear a wide variety, just the ones mom bought ages ago. Hasn’t grown much since then, although she has started complaining about tightness around the chest area recently.”

“Cheeky little brat.” Yui said, pouting.

Maybe she doesn’t wear clothes because she has none? Yuuki thought. Mina would mix and match the same few pairs of clothes over and over, never complaining about it once. *I understand they mean a lot to you but they’re all rags by now.*

“Maybe I should take her clothes shopping someday. O-Or I could give her my hand-me-downs.”

“Thanks, for looking out for Mina.”

“D-Don’t mention it.” Yui played with her hair, facing away only to immediately turn back, her eyes widening. “Nice try but I, L*yu*cifer, am immune to your tricks.”

“Tricks?”

“I’m not Rio, you hear? I’m not Rio.” Yui grumbled, giving Yuuki the cold shoulder as she looked through a clothes rack full of skirts. She picked one out eventually and began fiddling with the hem. “Look at the fluffage, the fluffage.”

“Looks good.”

Maybe, I don’t know. I’m sure it’ll be fine.

“The color isn’t very L*yu*cifer, though.”

“Guess I’m past my prime.”

“Like an expired prime rib?”

“Yes, like an expired prime rib now can you please say ‘I’m sure it’d look super good on you, Yui’?”

“I’m sure it’d look super good on you, Yui.” Yuuki obediently repeated.

An awfully satisfied smile spread across Yui’s face. “Oh, alright. Let me go try it on then.”

“I’ll be at the bookstore a floor up if you need me. Lat–”

“Hold it.” This time she grabbed him by the arm, bringing her face in closer in an intimidating manner just like before. “Are you doing this on purpose? Is this just a joke to you?”

“No, I’m just a little confused. What am I supposed to do while waiting?”

“Nothing. You’re supposed to stand there and wait.”

“That’s it? Sounds boring.”

“Go do squats or something, I don’t know.”

Living up to the name I see, Lyucifer. Sadistic as ever.

Yui picked up an additional short sleeved top before heading inside the fitting room but her hands were full and she seemed to be struggling with her bag.

“Let me hold that for you.”

“Hmm? O-Oh, thanks.” Yui seemed surprised at first before suddenly breaking into a smile. “Plus five Yui points. Keep up the good work.”

“What’d you put in this? Feels awfully heavy.”

“Minus one hundred Yui points!” Yuuki’s Yui points vanished in an instant. “Actually, give it. Don’t want you peeking inside.” She said, taking her bag back and placing it on the fitting room floor.

She’s probably hiding her joke book in there, if I had to guess.

“Once I throw open the curtain, you’re going to shower me with hella praise. Capeesh?”

“Hella praise?”

“Hella hella praise.” Yui said as she went inside the fitting room, closing the curtain, only to immediately poke her head out. “Go away please.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll DM you once I’m finished changing.” Yuuki gave her the “are you serious?” face. “L-Look. I don’t want you hearing me u-undress.” She said, her face turning light pink.

“Awfully sensitive for the literal devil, no?”

“S-Shuddup! Off with you, shoo!” Yui waved him away.

Yuuki saw no point in arguing, so he did as he was told.

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Bored, Yuuki left the clothes store. He leaned against a railing, absently gazing down at the floor below.

He suddenly whipped his head around, feeling as if he was being watched, yet there wasn’t a single familiar face among the passersby. *Must’ve been my imagination.* He thought.

“I beckon thee, minion!”

A few minutes later, Yuuki received a cringy DM from Yui, so he returned to the fitting room and called out to her.

“Voila!” Yui threw open the curtain, appearing in a light pink dress and white blouse.

As Yuuki found himself distracted by L*yu*cifer’s apparel, which was messily dumped inside a basket, Yui looked at him as if to say “go on already.”

“Wow, amazing.”

“You’re terrible at this. No matter, I expected as much. Alright, repeat after me ‘Yui is a C*yu*tie!’”

“Yui is a C*yu*tie?”

“Say it like you mean it.”

“Yui is a C*yu*tie?!”

“This isn’t a horror movie. Now, from the top.”

Yuuki wanted to avoid saying something stupid and get weird looks, so he changed the topic instead.

“Black is good but I think bright colors suit you best.”

“M-Mhmm. Alright, guess I may as well buy it.”

Yuuki was by no means an expert but he tried finding something to compliment, regardless.

Yui then turned toward the mirror, checking herself out as she pulled on the skirt’s hem to check the quality of the fabric. When she saw the price tag, however, her face turned sour.

“Although, they are both spring items, so they should go on discount soon. No point in buying them now.”

“Mhmm.”

“Also, you could be tricking me for all I know.”

Yui appeared surprisingly level headed.

I’d expect the literal devil to be a little more impulsive or is that asking too much? Yuuki thought as Yui suddenly pointed him in the face.

“Once more, repeat after me ‘Yui Ast*yu*tie!’”

“Yui As what?”

“You look confused. Baffled, even.”

Because I am. Is it... some kind of slang? Yuuki fired his brain on all cylinders, attempting to decipher what it could possibly mean.

Just as he was about to call it quits, Yuuki experienced a sudden revelation. He stepped toward Yui, slowly extending his arm toward her butt.

Yui jumped back, her face covered in shock. “Wh-What do you think you’re doing?”

“Checking for teeth. Ass toothy, and all.”

“It’s As-tyu-tie!”

Ass toothy wasn’t it, judging by her visceral reaction.

“Astyu... ty? Like the ty in itchy, tasty?”

“Do I look like a zombie to you?”

Shopping for clothes ended up getting put on hold, Yuuki’s question remaining unanswered. Yuuki walked outside the store and waited for Yui to finish changing.

“Next up we’ve got, uhh…”

Yui aimlessly wandered the place, looking all around. She seemed to have no destination in mind, appearing to be out of ideas.

After a few minutes, Yui spotted a giant bear plush sitting at the front of a knick-knack shop and began moving toward it.

“So cute.”

Yuuki watched Yui get sucked in by the knick-knack shop’s gravitational pull out of the corner of his eye as he carried on forward.

“Where are you going?” Yui ran up to him, tugging on his sleeve.

Yuuki didn’t like her condemning tone. He looked Yui in the eye and said, “No, where are you going?”

“You’re supposed to follow along with a warm smile, not run away from me!”

Why can’t you just say where you want to go instead of making me play guessing games? Yuuki, formally Yui’s servant for the day, argued no further,

entering the store alongside her.

The inside was bursting with knick-knacks, toys and sweets. Yuuki had never seen anything like it.

Yui went down one of its cramped, narrow aisles with a familiar stride.

As she passed by a row of penguin bird-thing plushies, Yui gave each of them a quick tap on the head. She seemed awfully pleased with herself, even if it made her seem somewhat lacking upstairs.

"Ast*yu*te, huh?"

"Hmm? Too late for compliments now, buddy."

Yui appeared to have taken it as a compliment. *The darkness runs deep.*

She proceeded to wander about the store, commenting on weird foreign dolls and shady anime merch as she went.

Eventually they stumbled across a modest literature corner, a book on blood types catching Yui's eye. She asked, "What's your type?"

"Normal."

"Blood type, wise guy."

"B."

"B? Hmm, you don't say."

"What's with the creepy grin?"

"Oh, nothing." Yui said, passing him a side glance.

What's so funny? Yuuki felt the urge to sock someone's chin.

"What do you think's my type?"

"Beats me."

"Play along, please."

She said, seamlessly switching from happy to angry. *All because my answer wasn't absolutely perfect.* Yuuki went into thinking mode.

"AB?"

"Wrong."

"B?"

"Wroong."

"A?"

"Can you get anything right for once?" Yui snarled, heaving a comically heavy sigh. "Unbelievable. You're a terrible judge of character."

"Because I couldn't guess your blood type?"

"You should really read up on these things, especially the proper way to treat an O lady."

"Pff."

“Don’t ‘pff’ me, bub” Yui took the book, flipping through it before showing it to Yuuki.

“O types tend to be careless, tardy and live in filth. Wow, literally you.”

“As if you’ve ever been to my room.”

“Doesn’t matter. I didn’t write the book.”

“Uh-huh, now can you read what it actually says?”

Yuuki looked over to the strengths section. “O types are caring, sisterly types, always willing to compromise with others for mutual benefit... yeah, bogus. Or maybe you’re just lying about your type.”

“And now he’s calling me a liar. Great.”

“You’re actually an AB, right?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Mina’s an AB.”

“There you go, treating me like the little sister type again. I really don’t think me and Mina are all that alike, contrary to popular belief.”

“I just thought it fits you, is all.”

Yui froze for a second before her gaze began wandering, her eyes blinking rapidly. “I-I guess I do have a bit of an AB side, now that you mention it. An Assault Buster side, that is.”

“Just know that I don’t really believe in blood types.”

“Why do I even bother?” Yui slammed the book shut, placing it back into its original spot. “Off we go now, come on.” She urged.

They left the knick-knack shop, only for Yui to stop after taking three steps. She stuck her face against a glass display case, squealing as she gazed at the pendants and necklaces within.

“Look at all the shinies.” Yuuki tried to walk past all nonchalantly, only for Yui to grab his sleeve without even looking. Defeated, Yuuki stopped. “Isn’t that one cute?” She said, pointing at a shiny gemstone hanging off a chain.

“Didn’t I give you one earlier?”

“Do you have to say it like a mother telling her child we have toys back home?”

“Did it help?”

“Oh, you know…” Yui vaguely responded, her eyes glued to the window. She appeared a little uncomfortable with the topic.

Maybe I was a little too forceful with the gifts.

“It’s okay if you threw them away, I don’t mi…” Yui began rummaging through her bag partway through his sentence, busting out two differently colored worry stones. Both were gifts from Yuuki.”

“You... had them on you?”

“Y-Yeah. For good luck, you know?”

“I see.” Yuuki shifted his gaze away from Yui’s hands, her upturned eyes meeting his.

“Wh-What?”

“Nothing, I think you just made my day a little.”

Yui looked away in embarrassment, her lip slightly twitching. She then clutched the wealth and worry stone, holding them aloft. “Behold: Gold Mental Power!”

“Sounds like an energy drink. Feel like I’ve had a similar exchange with Mina before.”

“What did I just say about comparing us?” Yui aggressively stuffed the stones back into her bag, proceeding to point at a nearby sunglasses rack. “W-Woah! Sunglasses!” She grabbed a pair, bringing it right up to Yuuki’s face. “Try ‘em on.”

“Nuh-uh.” Yuuki said, receiving a light blow to the shoulder. “Not cool.”

“The ticket, Yuuki.” Yui lifted her chin, gazing up at him. Yuuki begrudgingly took the glasses, putting them on. Yui tilted her head, “Pff! Nope, definitely not!” She bursted into a seemingly endless fit of laughter. Yuuki unconsciously extended his hand toward Yui’s cheek, pinching it. “Ouwsh.”

“Sorry. Accident.” Yuuki hurriedly let go.

Her face looked too pinchable; he just couldn’t help himself. *Well, she stopped laughing but now she’s going to start nagging.* Yuuki thought, bracing himself for the worst.

Yui, however, simply held down her cheek, smirking. “What’s with the smirk?”

“Hmm? Oh, don’t worry about it.”

“Uh-huh. Creepy.”

“That’s the third time today. What’s so ‘creepy’ about my smile, huh?”

It’s been that many times already? Yuuki tilted his head as Yui continued the attack.

“What kind of boyfriend regularly describes his partner with the word ‘creepy’ in the middle of a date?”

“You kept count. Impressive.”

“Third times a curse, you know?”

“Awfully generous for the *literal* devil.”

L*yu*cifer was, surprisingly enough, more patient than the original. *It seems a little praise goes a long way.*

“Enough. Gimme those.” Yui snatched the sunglasses away, putting them on. “That’s what it is to be young. How do I look by the way?” She grinned, adjusting them for the perfect angle.

“Like a middle schooler trying really hard to look cool.”

“Me, cringy middle schooler? Alright, for the third time now, say it with me, ‘Yui Suav*yu*tie!’”

“Yui Suav*yu*pee.”

“Good one! Got me real good there, Yuuki! Now from the top, let’s hear it!”

Yui took the sunglasses off, putting them back where they belonged. She then proceeded to smack Yuuki across the back. *Ouch.* Her voice was so loud a group of two girls gave them weird looks as they passed by. *This is really starting to drag now.*

“Sorry, Yui.”

“I don’t remember telling you to say ‘Sorry, Yui’!”

“Please stop.”

“Or that either!”

“Yui Asc*yu*tie Suav*yu*pee.”

“Did I tell you to mash them all together?”

Leave me alone. Yuuki frowned, covering his ears.

Yui took out the rolled up yes ticket in response, bringing it right up to his nostril. “Why the long face? Want me to shove it? Shove it all the way up? Shove it till it comes out your mouth? Hmm?” Yui kept going, appearing to enjoy herself greatly.

Finally showed your true form I see, Lyucifer.

Yuuki removed his hands from his ears, heaving a theatrically heavy sigh. “Whew, I’m tired.”

“Cute. Listen here, buddy. I’m L*yu*cifer, the devil, el diablo. Do you think I care poor little Yuuki is ‘tired’? Hmm? Do you?”

“Let’s take a break. I’ll buy you something.”

“Break, it is.”

Yuuki’s proposition was surprisingly met with a nod.

They left the shop, moving floors to the food court. Upon arrival, they noticed a long row of people in the distance.

Upon approaching, they were greeted by an ornate easel that said "OPEN!" in big, bold letters.

"Looks like a boba place. The line's a little long but, up to you." Yuuki said, turning his head toward Yui.

She sniffed at the row of people. "Heh, look at all those simpletons lining up to try out the latest craze. I bet they just want an excuse to say boba."

"So, that's a no?"

"Yes please!" Yui threw her arms in the air, frolicking to the end of the line. She turned around, beckoning Yuuki over.

Chapter Twelve

Surprise Guest

Later that same day, Rio visited Yui's place for the first time.

She was just about to look up videos of the comedian who appeared in Yui's live comedy DVDs, when suddenly, a DM from Mina.

"We're throwing a party at our place tomorrow and you're invited as our surprise guest (Yui's gonna be there)!"

Party? Yui? Something felt off but Rio didn't have any plans for tomorrow either way, so she responded with an okay.

Rio, formally a surprise guest, was told to keep her attendance a secret from Yuuki and Yui. It would be Rio's first time attending any party period, let alone as a surprise guest.

How does one "party?" Rio wondered, filled with equal parts worry and excitement.

The next day she got on a bus at a nearby stop.

Rio passed by her usual end stop, heading straight for the station.

Mina told Rio to wait for her phone call before turning up at their place. Having left early, she decided to kill some time by the station. Yui had suggested they go clothes shopping some day, so she surveyed the nearby department store's clothing section.

After a little while, she received a DM from Mina. *"It's time!"*

Rio took an escalator back down to the first floor, only to hear a few familiar voices nearby. She looked over. *Is that... Yui and Narito?*

She looked nigh unrecognizable in her black get up but it was, without a doubt, Yui. Beside her was Yuuki, treading listlessly.

Rio quickly took cover, practically going back the way she came as she proceeded to tail the two. They went up two floors, booking it to the clothing section.

Despite their frequent squabbling, Yui seemed to be enjoying herself, getting awfully loud at times.

After doing a bit of roaming, Yuuki left the store as he waited for Yui to change. Rio followed in hot pursuit, observing Yuuki from a safe distance as he leaned idly against a railing.

Yuuki then suddenly whipped his head back, prompting Rio to flee the scene.

Surprisingly perceptive, aren't you? Rio retreated into the bathroom, equipping an emergency mask and tying her hair in a ponytail.

Her disguise complete, Rio returned to the shop. She found Yui twirling inside the fitting room, showing her fresh drip off to Yuuki.

*Cyu*te*? Ast*yu*te? What?* Rio had never seen Yui this giddy; The faces she made around Yuuki were nothing like the ones around Rio. *She seems so happy.*

Thinking back on it, Yui was acting a little strange yesterday. When Rio brought Yuuki up in conversation, she showed a startling level of interest, asking every little thing he had said about her.

"Over here! Come on!" Yui ordered Yuuki around without restraint.

Yuuki went along with her whims, almost like he was used to it. If Rio didn't know any better, she might've legitimately thought they were dating.

Yui then suddenly said something Rio simply couldn't ignore. "Listen here, buddy. I'm L*yu*cifer, the devil, el diablo."

She was Lyucifer all along! Rio couldn't believe her ears. *Her words and her actions don't match whatsoever. Why is that?*

She continued the tailing, observing them from a distance.

The two visited a knick-knack shop next, fooling around much the same. Afterward they lined up at a boba place, got their drinks and found someplace to sit.

Rio got herself some udon for blending in purposes, sneakily approached the two from behind and sat down at a nearby table with her back turned. She then began slurping on her udon as she listened in on their conversation.

"Really? You've never heard of the boba nostrils challenge? The one where you shove boba inside your nose. It's super trendy."

"Our generation is screwed. Isn't that dangerous?"

"Life threatening, even."

What a horrifying exchange. The devil whispers...

"Do it. I'll record you."

"Do it yourself. You're L*yu*cifer, aren't you? Or should I say, Bobafer."

"Time for Bobafer to go viral, baby... is what you thought I'd say, isn't it?"

This is no exorcism, you're just letting her do whatever! Making Yui all subdued and docile... You're no priest, you're a devil master.

The two tried talking each other into nostriling boba. When that didn't work, Yui shot a boba pearl at Yuuki spitball style, asking how he liked her

“boba cannon.”

Their exchanges were very much grade schooler tier, yet to an outsider they looked like nothing more than a cringey couple flirting in a cringe worthy manner.

I see how it is, Devil Master Narito and Lyucifer! All this time you’ve been mocking me behind my back!

As Rio angrily slurped up the last mouthful of udon, her phone started vibrating; Mina was calling. Rio couldn’t risk being found out, so she rejected it.

A DM immediately followed. *“Where are you? They’re going to be back any minute!”* It appeared her time was up.

Rio, understandably, didn’t want to party with the conniving devils anymore, yet she didn’t want to break her promise to Mina either. But, most importantly, there was a record that needed setting straight.

The two’s antics continued as Rio exited the store, setting off for Mina’s apartment.

Upon arriving at the appropriate street, Mina started walking toward her from the other end, bags in either hand, a hat pulled over her eyes. Mina almost walked straight past Rio, so she called out to her.

Mina’s eyes flew open before eventually noticing it was Rio. “Whew, it’s just you. What’s with the mask and ponytail combo? Are you some kind of perv?”

Rio had forgotten to take her mask off. *Still, would it hurt you to be a little nicer?* Rio took it off, only for Mina to point at her chest.

“What is this t-shirt, or this granny ass top? So tacky.”

“That's all I had. I... accidentally threw my dress in the washer yesterday.”

“My god. Zero guestly sense whatsoever. Also, where were you? You’re late!”

“Something came up, sorry…”

“Whatever. Here, take this!”

Mina’s bags were chock full of snacks and beverages. Rio held one as they walked inside the apartment.

After placing the bags onto the table, Mina immediately began going through them. “Don’t just stand there, help! Time’s a wastin’!” She said, unloading snacks onto the table.

Rio watched absently, her mind elsewhere. “There’s something I need to ask you. It’s about them.” She said slowly, quietly.

Mina tilted her head. “Them?”

“Narito and Yui. Be straight with me: What’s their relationship?”

Mina blinked a few times in amazement before putting on a smile. “Why they’re... a lovey-dovey couple, of course! Aren’t they just perfect for each other?” Mina’s matter of fact tone left Rio’s mouth agape.

I knew it. I knew it ever since I saw that face, the face of a girl in love.

“I knew it from the very start!”

“I-is everything okay, Rio? You’re scaring me.”

Now that I think about it, I never got context for that picture I took of the two of them together. Yuuki claimed they ‘just so happened’ to be walking back home together but had likely either started or were already dating. Which is to say, they made up complete nonsense to hide their relationship from me.

Mina looked on with worry as Rio hung her head. “They didn’t tell me a thing.” She muttered despondently. “Maybe they wanted to hide the truth from me, I don’t know. What I do know is that they played me, laughing behind my back as they did.”

“What’re you saying? Yukkie and Yui would never do that!”

“Never? I experienced it first hand. They played me for a fool!”

Why couldn’t you have told me the truth from the very start? If you two really are serious about this I have no reason to ridicule you, nor do I have any intention of tearing you apart. I guess that’s really all I ever was to Yui-- not a friend, merely an acquaintance.

“’Seatmate killer? Watch over from a distance? You’ve been going out this whole time! Why would y–”

“You don’t understand. They’re doing it for me!” Mina exclaimed in a shockingly firm tone.

Rio lifted her head, looking her in the eye. “What... do you mean?”

“They’re pretend dating for me.”

“Pretend... dating?”

“Yukkie said he’d get a girlfriend to help me make friends.”

MORI

The words “pretend dating” confused the hell out of Rio.

To quickly summarize Mina’s slightly convoluted explanation: Yuuki promised he’d get a girlfriend in exchange for her making a friend. Yui acted as his co-conspirator, taking on the role of pretend girlfriend.

“I didn’t know about any of this.”

“They’re keeping it a secret, so I don’t find out. Dunno about Yuukie but Yui seems really into it, she’s just too shy to admit it. Cute, right?”

“Wait. How do you know about any of this?”

“I saw his DMs with Yui the other day.” Mina crossed her arms, grinning evilly. “Heh. Silly Yukkie, thought he could keep me in the dark.”

The pretend dating thing was a little hard to swallow, although it felt very much in character.

“But don’t tell them, okay? If they find out that I looked at Yukkie’s phone, even if it was laying there just begging for me to do so, things won’t be pretty for poor ol’ Mina.” She emphasized, a concerned look on her face. It appeared she wasn’t completely without guilt.

Rio stood there, completely appalled. “D-Does that mean I... was L*yu*cifer all along?”

“L*yu*cifer?”

You’re no Lyucifer, you’re nothing but a clown. How didn’t you realize Mina had no friends? How can you, in good conscience, condemn them for doing what’s best for Mina? So what if it’s a lie? As Rio’s mind flooded with questions, she noticed Mina’s confused stare.

Rio hastily put on a smile, placing her hand on Mina’s head. “Must be rough, not having any friends.” She softly said.

Mina never gave any such indication, at least not to her anyway. Rio’s eyes started watering. She knew the feeling all too well.

“I haven’t made any yet but... it’s okay. Yuukie takes good care of me, even if he can get a little busy sometimes.” Mina said, smiling.

As much as Mina liked messing around, in the end she let Yuuki study in peace. Rio thought she’d watch over in his stead but Mina started studying practically of her own volition, almost as if she had been looking for an excuse to do just that.

“Yui’s fun to tease too. She’s great, not as great as Yukkie, but still. So I start crying the other day, right? Yui brings this weird joke book thingy to try and cheer me up but it’s the most boooring thing ever…” Mina continued gleefully reminiscing on the event.

That's right. Yui... Yui, of all people, would never trick and mock someone behind their back. How could I forget what she did for me.

***

Rio couldn't quite recall when but one morning, seemingly out of the blue, her homeroom teacher announced, "Today is the start of no insult week. If you catch anyone throwing insults around, be sure to let me know."

Those caught insulting one of their peers were forced to apologize in front of everyone.

In hindsight, the approach was definitely less than ideal. Grade Schooler Rio, however, didn't think much of it, happily complying.

Rio always had a strong internal sense of justice; likely the influence of her mother, a former middle school teacher.

She poked her nose into everyone's business, girls and boys alike, reporting even the mildest of insults. Rio felt no shame, on the contrary, she felt her cause was noble.

The constant praise from the teacher left Rio blind to the tension starting to form between her and her classmates. At some point the tension peaked. The catalyst? Something as trivial as one of the boys sneaking candy into the classroom.

They boy hadn't insulted anyone. He was the mood setter of the class--not the type to throw insults around. Even if he did, no insult week had ended ages ago. Rio reprimanded the boy before proceeding to snitch on him.

"Ms. Righteous Confusion at it again. So annoying."

Later it came out that it wasn't actually him who snuck in the candy, a friend tempted him into taking one. Rio hadn't actually seen him eat the candy, she went off of what one of the girls from her former friend group had told her.

The girl insisted she had said nothing, refusing to speak further on the matter. Rio suspected she might've lied on purpose to screw over a boy she didn't like.

In the end, no one could figure out who was right or wrong. All Rio gained was infamy along with the title of 'Ms. Righteous Confusion'.

It was only a matter of time before everyone began distancing themselves from Rio, talking behind her back. Rio didn't run, she tried talking things out head on.

"What's with the condescension?"
"I wish she'd get off her high horse for once. So annoying"

If she was in the wrong, she'd apologize. If they were in the wrong, she'd make them apologize.

Despite Rio's best attempts at initiating a dialogue, all she got was made fun of. If anything, their ridicule only became more blatant as she had apparently not learned her lesson.

Rio was convinced she had done nothing wrong; If a rule was correct, she made sure others obeyed it, respected it.

In her mind Rio knew the world wasn't all black and white, yet she nonetheless refused to bend, nay, she couldn't, it would've invalidated everything she stood for.

I don't care what they say. It's just who I am. She told herself.

Rio quickly realized that sticking by her principles required will. The will to carry on alone, the will to push past everyone in her way.

Rio had that will. She had it in spades. She excelled both academically and athletically. Her grades were consistently high. Teachers recognized her.

Despite all the backbiting, no one actually confronted her head on.

After realizing she could get by fine on her own, Rio's isolationist tendencies only worsened.

While others struggled in vain, she cruised by. Occasionally Rio would extend a helping hand, only to be viewed as condescending, perpetuating her infamy. She'd act as nice and friendly as possible, only to get disgusted looks in return.

I'm just one of those people who get hate for everything they do. She thought, having given up and gotten used to it by now.

Rio knew she could make it on her own, and she intended to do just that.

"Nice to meet you, Hanashiro! You wouldn't believe how much a relief it is sitting next to a girl for once."

"Please, Rio! Please! I promise I'll do my homework next time!"

"Feast your eyes on this, the perfect... huh? It's wrong? Uugh, can we switch bodies or something? Can we?"

Day after day after day, Yui'd hit her up with a smile, persistent to a fault.

Despite her cold demeanor, Rio was... happy. She realized that, even after all this time, she still longed for human connection.

Rio thought she'd gotten used to being the outcast, that she had the strength to endure solitude. And yet, it appeared the wounds ran deep, deep enough for Rio to lose sight of her surroundings over Yui.

***

"So then I said 'big words for someone named Yue!' to which she... hello? Rio, you listening?"

"Huh? I'm listening."

"Wake up already, jeez. Anyway, we keep this between us, understand? If they find out I found out, they might pretend break up. You see, I'd actually like them to start going out for real. I've tried getting them together but progress has been, shall we say, limited." Mina's innocent smile pierced Rio's chest, stifling her breath.

She had mistook their relationship. She had intruded upon it. *Here you go running to conclusions, being nothing but a massive bother again. You haven't changed one bit. So what if you didn't know any better? Have you tried having some faith in Yui for once? You did this to yourself.*

Mina spoke so positively of Yui.

She gets nothing but love and kindness anywhere she goes... my polar opposite. We were never meant to intersect; We just happened to become seatmates by pure coincidence. That's all our relationship ever was--coincidence.

She got on with others, whereas you avoided them, brandishing empty self-righteousness: borrowed strength hiding weakness. Without it you fall quiet, unable to do anything but maintain silence.

Everyone knows you're hopelessly shallow, they've always known. No wonder you get mocked and made fun of.

This is your destiny, the destiny you almost forgot thanks to... because of Yui. It was all a big mistake. Her... Yui's kindness blindsided you. It gave you false hope.

You're nothing but a nuisance, doomed to be hated by everyone you meet. Accept it. Embrace it. You have to let Ms. Righteous Confusion go, or else...

"Shut up. You're so annoying."

Rio would've rather lived the rest of her life alone, eyes closed, ears plugged, than to hear those words coming out of Yui's mouth.

All you have to do is return to your former self, your pre-Yui self. Simple. Now you just need to announce it to her, face to face.

"We need to get ready!" Mina exclaimed, rummaging through the shopping bags once more. As she pulled out a box of candies, her hands stopped. "Crap, I only got chocoshrooms! We can't have a war with just these. Imma run back to the store real quick, finish prepping without me!" Mina said as she hastily rushed out of the room.

Chapter Thirteen

Yui, Seatmate Killer

Yuuki and Yui emptied their drinks, ending their short break.

Just as Yuuki began wondering what L*yu*cifer had next up her sleeve, she suddenly mentioned how Mina must've been feeling lonely, so they decided to call it a wrap.

Yui appeared to have heard about the party, asking if Yuuki knew what the surprise was, which he did not.

Yuuki prepared himself to help out with arrangements as they entered his home. He had told Mina countless times to lock the door when she was in, and yet it wasn't.

Yuuki couldn't find her shoes, so he thought she probably went out somewhere, only to then spot an unfamiliar pair of nicely lined up sneakers sitting at the front door. He tilted his head, entering into the living room ahead of Yui.

It was awfully quiet, the setting sun streaming into the room.

Yuuki surveyed the room, his eyes stopping at a silhouette sitting at the dining table. Despite the silhouette's imposing look, its presence felt almost non-existent. It slowly stood up without saying a word, turning in their direction.

"Rio?" Yui surprisedly exclaimed from behind him.

Rio gazed down at the table. "Mina invited me over." She said in an awfully flat tone.

Cleanly opened sweets and neatly cut boxes of sweets lined the table. Two large juice bottles and three glasses sat beside them. This had to be Rio's doing; Mina wasn't capable of such feats.

"Woah!" Yui exclaimed, only to immediately tilt her head in confusion. "Wait a second." She said, looking Yuuki in the face. "Since when do Rio and Mina know each other?"

"Since she helped Mina study."

"A-Ahh... good to know. Wait, does that mean she's been over to your place before?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"No, nothing." She said with a stiff look.

Yuuki looked over the room again. “Where’s Mina?” He asked Rio, who was absently staring at the air.

“She ran back to the store. Said she forgot something.”

This isn’t everything? This has to be another one of strange pranks.

Yuuki nonetheless felt a little relieved as the mystery behind Mina’s disappearance had been officially solved.

“Guess we’ll have to wait to find out what the surprise is. There’s... nothing left to set up, so I suppose a little warmup is in order.” Yui said as she walked over to the sofa beside the TV, put her bag down and pulled out a controller. “Cower for today is the day I get my rightful revenge.”

You brought a controller... to a date? Yui came prepared, it would seem. *No wonder she didn’t want me seeing the inside of her bag.*

Yui grumbled to herself, turning the TV on and booting up Bash Bros. like she owned the place.

Yuuki looked over to Rio as if to ask “what do we do with her?” Rio, however, just stood there, silently staring at the table. Something wasn’t right here. Yuuki looked at her face, wondering if she was perhaps having stomach pains again.

Rio suddenly lifted her gaze, looking him dead in the eye. “Can we talk? There’s something I need to ask.”

Rio said in a firm tone of voice, continuing without waiting for an answer. “Yours and Yui’s stories don’t add up... why is that?”

“Stories?”

“To put it bluntly, you hate me, don’t you? Why else would you make stuff up to keep me in the dark? If you think I’m a bother, feel free to say so.”

Yuuki was taken aback but he kept eye contact and said, “No, no I don’t hate you. Is... something wrong?”

“No. I just remembered something I had once forgotten.” Rio declared, her face even more, nay, the most lifeless it had ever been. She spoke matter of factly, her voice devoid of all emotion. “I think we’ve all had enough. This bother is cutting herself out of your lives. Must be music to your ears, I’d imagine.”

“Uhh, not sure what’s going on, but if it was something I did, sorry.”

“You don’t understand. A simple sorry isn’t going to change anything.”

Yuuki tried calming Rio down, only to fail miserably.

He still had no clue what she was going on about as they both fell silent. Only Bash Bros. noises and the sound of Yui aggressively button mashing

filled the room. Yui appeared awfully absorbed, not taking her eyes off the game for even a second.

Rio didn't so much as look in her direction, continuing to address Yuuki. "You saw it too, didn't you? The hate, the ridicule I draw... I deserve every bit of it."

"I don't think so at all. You're amazing, Rio. You can do anything you put your mind to."

"Exactly. I'm strong, I can do anything myself. That's why I prefer being alone. I'm not a thoughtless loner wandering aimlessly through life like you. Oh, and would you mind leaving my spot alone? I found it; It's mine and mine alone."

Her voice was cold, way colder than even the first time they'd met. Her firm, unwavering tone sounded nothing like the girl that felt so vulnerable when talking about Yui.

Yuuki suspected there was some kind of misunderstanding at play, as usual, but Rio's oppressive air gave no room for pointless questions.

As he failed to think of the right words in the heat of the moment, Rio turned her eyes toward the kitchen.

"I'll head back home now. Mina bought a cake, it's in the fridge if you want some."

"Wait, you're not staying for the party?"

"Is that a joke? Do you want me to ruin your party as well?" Rio said with a slight grin on her face. "I know you two went out today. What do you need me for?" She blurted out, still facing away. "The seatmate killer and her dense, easygoing companion. You're perfect for each other." Rio shot a glance at the sofa before turning her back to Yuuki. "Goodbye." She muttered, walking toward the entrance…

Yuuki almost stuck his arm all the way out, only to get second thoughts. She felt volatile, as if picking the wrong words would instantly destroy all they had built, never to be put back together.

I'm strong, I can do anything myself. That's why I prefer being alone. If that's how she feels, what right do I have to stop her? But is this really...

"Rio!"

It was then that a piercing scream cut through the air, stopping Rio dead in her tracks. It belonged to none other than Yui.

She got off the sofa, straddled over and stood before Rio's path.

"Rio." Yui said her name again, looking right at her.

Rio hung her head, avoiding eye contact.

Yui brought her controller out in front of her. “Take this. You’re not leaving till I win, understand?” Yui grabbed Rio’s unmoving hand, trying to shove the controller into it.

Rio stubbornly fought back, her gaze remaining glued to the floor. “I’m heading back home. I already told Yuuki this but–”

“I heard the entire thing. You were saying some weird stuff back there.”

“W-Weird stuff? Weird stuff?!” Rio shoved Yui’s hand back, the controller falling onto the ground with a cold thunk. Emotion had finally returned to her voice. Rio looked Yui in the eye. “Did you not understand a thing I said?” She said in a firm tone. “I said I won’t bother you anymore, so leave me be.”

“Is this how you rationalize running away? That scared of losing to me, huh?”

“H-Huh? Why would you... stop joking around!” Rio bit down on her lip, shooting Yui a glare. “I-I hate you, Yui! I’ve hated you ever since we became seatmates!” Rio exclaimed, her voice shaking.

Just seconds ago she was composed, cool as ice, only to crumble right before his eyes. Rio was on the attack yet it felt like she was on the backfoot, not Yui.

She shook her head as if to escape Yui’s quiet stare, dropping her gaze. “I enjoy solitude and you took it away from me! I only pretended to get along with you! So please, leave me be! Don’t ever talk to me again!” Rio screamed, clenching her fists, squeezing her eyes shut.

Yui, unfazed, looked her dead in the eye and said, “Now I definitely won’t.”

“W-Why not?”

“Because I’m the sorest loser around.”

“H-huh? So what?!”

“You see, I’m…” She dropped her gaze, her voice trailing off.

Rio knitted her brow, shooting her an intense glare. Yui lifted her head, took her glare head on, and said, “I’m the seatmate killer, after all.” Rio’s eyes shot open. “I capture the hearts of my seatmates. Every single one.” She continued in a firm tone. “You can’t be the only exception, I won’t allow it. You’re not going anywhere until I’m all you can think about, day or night. Thought I’d just let you quit while you’re ahead? I’m afraid you, my seatmate, were sorely mistaken.” She declared.

Rio listened in blank amazement, suddenly snapping back to reality. “Y-You said the seatmate killer thing was a farce! You lied to my face!” She yelled, her lips quivering.

“The seatmate killer will do anything it takes to win, even if it means lying.”

“I-I hate liars! I’ve told you this countless times before!”

“Heh, tough one, aren’t you? The struggle only makes it more satisfying.” Yui smiled, ignoring her vehement protests.

Rio was at a complete loss for words, staring blankly at Yui for a while before eventually mumbling, “Yui…” She covered her mouth as she fell onto her knees. “Why? why would you…” Tears poured out of her downcast eyes as she frantically shook her head. “Y-You don’t understand! I don’t deserve this! Us becoming seatmates was just a coincidence! A coincidence!”

“What’re you talking about? Everyone becomes friends by coincidence, that’s just how it works. You, coincidentally, had the misfortune of getting me as your seatmate, and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

Rio began weeping as if something inside her had erupted all at once, her shoulders bouncing up and down.

Yui crouched down beside her, placing a hand on her back. “Sorry, Rio.” She softly whispered. “I’m not a harem expert, you see. I have trouble tracking multiple flags at once, so I can get a little short-sighted sometimes. I had no idea you were having lunch all by your lonesome. Even now, I’m not sure why you’re so angry at me.”

“I’m not angry! It was all my fault from the very start! All of it!”

“It can’t all be your fault, that’s absurd. Don’t say stuff like that.”

“No, it is! I snitched on him because I wanted attention from my teacher! I didn’t care if it was right or wrong, all I cared for was the praise! I’m the real liar! I’m the very thing I hate most!” Rio lowered her head and began wailing. Yuuki could’ve never imagined her breaking down this bad.

Yui froze up, having seemingly lost track of the conversation.

Yuuki stopped thinking, deciding to move instead. He leaned over, giving her a gentle pat on the head almost on instinct. “It’s okay, I know you’re the best, Rio. I don’t think there’s any need for you to get so hung up on this. Remember how you helped Mina out? That reminds me, I forgot to thank you for the notes. Thanks, Rio.”

“No, I’m not. I’m…” Rio shook her head in denial.

This reminded Yuuki of his sister.

“But you have to be upfront with us. We’re not mind readers, you know?” Yuuki said to Rio just as Mina had said to him that day, smiling.

Rio stared back at him, a glimmer of hope in her eye. “Exactly, everyone hates me because I’m not upfront. I’m not strong. I’m weak, hopelessly weak. So I run, telling myself I can get by on my own, telling myself everyone else is wrong. But in reality I... I can’t stand the loneliness.”

“I see.” Yuuki nodded, continuing to gently pat her.

Eventually, little by little, Rio’s ragged breathing went back to normal. Rio timidly lifted her head up, gazing at Yuuki with puffy eyes. “You’re... not mad? Even after all the horrible things I said?”

“I figured you were under some weird misunderstanding. Besides, I’m used to oddballs.” Yuuki shot Yui a glance, getting a confused look back. “Also, you keep using the word weak but you’re the seatmate breaker, remember? Even your nickname is powerful.”

“Not again. You never did explain what it means…”

“The seatmate breaker smiles when her seatmate least expects it, melting their heart through the power of contrast, you know, with her usual scary self.” He said, smiling.

Rio’s gaze softened, her watery eyes faintly glistening.

As they stared at each other, Yui suddenly shoved Yuuki aside, stealing his spot. She also slapped his hand away, proceeding to pat Rio’s head herself. “I’m telling you, your smile is moe character tier cute, Rio. Or should I say, seatmate... break, was it? Seatmate giga drill break.”

“No, it’s seatmate breaker.” Yuuki immediately corrected her, only to be pushed away.

“I want you to be upfront with me, Rio. I’m not a mind reader, you know? I promise I won’t get mad or anything.”

And have his line partially plagiarized.

Rio, nonetheless, did just that, as if she had been offered salvation. “You never notice how much effort I put in learning about the things you enjoy. When you find out I’m better than you at something, you just happen to lose interest all of the sudden.”

“I see... Sorry.”

“You do this sneaky thing where you say ‘hope you’re not mad’ when flaking on me. You constantly lie about the smallest of things. You brute force lame, grade school level puns all the time.”

“I feel you.”

“The way you touch me feels oddly inappropriate. You look at my legs weird. You sound and act like a middle aged man sometimes. You suck at video games. You–”

“I understand. I understand completely.” Yui wrapped her arms around Rio, attempting to bring her avalanche of complaints to a premature close.

“Hear out to the end, come on.” Yuuki said.

“I’m already dead. Don’t overkill.” Yui glared at him.

Hit her where it hurts, it seems.

“Are you mad? Do you hate me?”

“What? No, why would I be?” Yui said with a smile. Although, judging by the twitch in her cheek, she was probably a teeny tiny bit angry. Rio started looking worried again and Yui appeared to have noticed. “It’s okay Rio. It’s okay. I was just playing it up, you know, for comedic effect, okay? L-Look, I’ve got just the thing for situations like these.” Yui got up, practically sprinted over to the sofa, and began rummaging through her bag.

“No, Yui. Don’t.”

Yuuki tried preemptively stopping Yui before she could,as expected of her, pull out her joke book. Yui froze up in a “don’t what?” face when the door suddenly came open and shut, a set of loud footsteps rapidly approaching the living room.

“You’re here already?!” Mina exclaimed the second she turned up.

She looked at Yuuki, then Yui, then finally Rio, crouching on the ground. “Cat-fight!” She abruptly yelled, putting her bag down and pulling out two separate boxes of sweets. “You’re mushroom-like so take this, Yui. Rio, you take this.” She said, shoving a box into their hands. Mina got in between the two as they tilted their heads in confusion, making an X with her arms. “Fight!”

“Enough.” Yuuki flicked her away.

Mina pouted, flaring up at him. “Oh, I see. You made Rio cry.”

“No I did not. Why is the bag full of balls?”

“Because it took me way too many tries to score this baby.” Mina pulled out one of the many gacha balls inside the bag. “Look Rio, cleft chin panda! Isn’t it lovely?” She said, waving a tiny animal figure in front of Rio. Rio hastily wiped away her tears but, before she could respond, Mina peered into her face. “You don’t look so good, Rio. Allow Mina to lift your spirits with an amusing gag!”

In an unexpected twist, Yui suddenly had her role stolen.

Yuuki shot her a glance, only to see Yui with her arms cockily crossed. “I suppose I’ll let my disciple handle this one.”

“Yui has a cleft chin, athlete’s foot and hemorrhoids!”

“That’s just a bunch of insults thrown together! Remember, you’re trying to cheer Rio up!”

“Yue has hemorrhoids, a cleft chin and athlete’s foot!”

“You just switched the order around! That’s it, you’re officially expelled!”

“Fool, elder Rio was my master all along! I experienced nothing but negative growth under your wing, Yue!”

The two’s petty arguing soon devolved into a full out brawl.

“Rio and Yukkie have some nice chemistry.” Mina said, shoving Yui’s face back.

“S-So?”

“But it’s okay. Yukkie said they were just friends.”

“Friends?” It appeared Mina had kept his words from when Rio first came to visit in mind. Yui suddenly became very excited. “Friends. Hmm... yes, friends! Yes, that’s right, friends!”

“Okay Rio, that’s enough crying for one day. We’ve got a party to throw!”

Mina grabbed Rio’s arm, pulling her up to her feet. Rio appeared hesitant to cry in front of Mina, putting on a bashful smile.

“Says the crybaby.” Yui commented, laughing. Yuuki nodded, laughing along.

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“Aand another one! Open wide, Yui!”

“Bamboo shots... mmm. Can feel myself... falling.”

With every Bash Bros. loss, Yui had a bamboo shoot shaped biscuit shoved down her throat.

It started out as a threeway, only to quickly devolve into a pitiful one sided beatdown. By the end, Yui had fully succumbed to the bamboo shot.

Mina eventually fell asleep, so they decided to call it a night.

They left Mina at home and went down the now dark alleys over to the nearest bus stop. Even as they waited at the empty bus stop, Yui still couldn’t stop complaining.

“I have to say though, all my losses came right down to the wire.”

“How have you not gotten any better after all this time?”

“As if you’re one to talk, spectator.” Yui was feeling awfully combative.

“Quit fighting you two.” Rio swiftly interjected from the side.

“Fighting? We’re not fighting. Only opponents of equal skill can ‘fight.’”

“Yeah, Yui still has a long way to go.”

“That’s it. Put ’em up, fool.”

“I said quit it.” Rio intervened, getting in between the two.

Yui begrudgingly stepped back, but not before shooting Yuuki a parting glare.

“Pff.”

“Whatcha laughin’ at, big guy?”

“Just thinking about how you told Rio ‘fighting is bad’ the other day.”

“Again, I’m not fighting, I’m establishing dominance.”

Rio, watching from the side, abruptly took Yui’s hand, then Yuuki’s and put them together. “Be nice to each other, you two.”

“R-Rio?”

Rio held their hands together with her own. As Yui squirmed while making odd noises, the bus conveniently arrived.

“Those hands better stay held.” Rio released her grip, boarding the bus. She held her hand up as the door closed, a satisfied smile on her face.

Chapter Fourteen

The Seven Faces of Yui

Yuuki and Yui stood in silence, watching the bus as it slowly faded out of view. They traded looks, releasing each other's hands.

"Let's go."

Yui nodded, and so they set off for the station next.

"Whew, I'm beat." Yui said with a sigh within the first few steps.

She really did seem beat, mellowing out to an almost comical degree. On that note, Yui fell quiet, wordlessly walking shoulder to shoulder with Yuuki.

He thought she looked a little down in the dumps, so Yuuki asked, "Tired?"

"You bet."

"But you were so lively just now, almost annoyingly so."

Yuuki expected her to bite back, but all he got in return was silence.

Sometime passed before Yui, facing forward, eventually mumbled, "I was just trying to compliment the mood. I'm a girl of seven faces, you know? Too exhausted to keep the act going, though. Running out of mana."

"Even Yui, the natural born actress, has her limits, huh?"

"I wish you'd stop making fun of me."

Yui shot back, though her delivery lacked bite. Her face was dead serious, and it didn't sound like she was joking.

After another brief window of silence, Yui, still facing forward, muttered, "I lost on purpose, by the way. To avoid spoiling the mood."

"Sure you did."

"Listen, contrary to popular belief, I'm not that bad at video games, okay? Also, I was always a bamboo shoot kind of girl." Yui said in an awfully serious tone. Yuuki looked at her in disbelief, only for Yui to let her gaze wander, not so much smiling. "In situations like these it's best to take on a clearly defined role, even if it's that of the clown. Mina seemed to enjoy herself. I'm glad to see she's... gotten a lot better over time. I honestly didn't expect Rio to go that hard on me but, if it helps bring a smile to her face, I don't mind one bit." Yui said, cracking a slight smile, only to immediately lower her eyes, her expression stiffening.

"I don't want to be hated by my friends either, so I subconsciously play the clown to get on their good side. I was scared too... you know? I had no

idea what made Rio so angry with me. My mind went completely blank as I thought 'crap, was it this? No, maybe that?' until I eventually figured that it was everything, all the little things combining to form the perfect storm." Yui paused upon those words. "Look at me, talking all by myself." She said with a wry smile.

"I thought with so many friends you wouldn't really care for each individual one but looks like I was wrong. I have basically no friends, so I wouldn't even know where to start. It's commendable, it really is."

"I don't have that many friends, just the regular amount. Also, it's not like I'm perfect or anything, as you saw. Maan, can I get anything right?"

Yui looked up to the sky, heaving a heavy sigh. She seemed unusually gloomy,

not a trace of her lively, boisterous self from mere moments ago to be found.

"You know, I was losing my mind the last time too. I'm in a room alone, Mina's still not home, and my mind's racing like 'what do I do, what do I do'. Then, when she started crying, I knew I had to say something but just thinking about Mina telling me to shut up almost made me cry." Yui said, falling silent.

Yuuki glanced over, only to see her on the brink of tears. "Yui…"

Next thing he knew, Yuuki had stopped moving, anchored in place.

Have I... saddled her with an unwanted burden, thinking that it's okay because it's Yui?

"Sorry, Yui. I…"

Nothing came after the I, no cool line to cheer Yui up when she needed it most; Yuuki didn't have the mental alacrity to come up with something on the fly.

Even his apology appeared to fall flat as Yui proceeded without him. As the distance between them gradually grew, step by step, it felt as though a wall had formed before him, blocking Yuuki's path. *What if she leaves me behind... for good?* The foreboding thought crossed Yuuki's mind as Yui abruptly stopped.

She then turned around, approaching with a light, almost bouncy step. Yui wordlessly extended her hand, placing it on Yuuki's head. She smiled, patting him. "Now now, don't cry. You're a big brother, remember?"

"You're a big brother now, Yuuki. Don't cry in front of Mina."

Mom said shortly after Mina was born as she patted his head, her hand warm, gentle, calming.

Yuuki thought mom's patting had mystical power, so he mimicked her when soothing Mina, hoping to replicate even half, nay, one tenth of said power.

At that moment, the gentle touch Yuuki had once forgotten came flooding back.

Yui isn't your mom; they're two completely separate people. Never forget that. You're not a small, helpless child anymore either. No more burderning her... no more relying on her.

Yuuki lifted his head, looking Yui right in the eye; he had finally found the right words "Yui…"

Just as he was about to say them, Yui quickly removed her hand. "Ha, gotcha!" Her cheery voice resounded.

Yui leaned over slightly, giving Yuuki an upturned look.

"Everything I just said was a lie, a joke, a hoax, all of it! Nothing can bring 'ol Yue down, I'm not that kind of character! You should've seen the look on your face when I patted you! Priceless, simply priceless! Did your heart flutter at my noble sacrifice? Did you fall for me? Fall hopelessly in love?" Yui put on her signature teasy smile, throwing a never-before-seen move, the finger twirl, in for good measure.

I got got again. Yuuki snapped back to his senses, immediately feeling his soul leave his body... and an odd sense of relief.

He heaved a heavy sigh, shrugging his shoulders so she wouldn't catch on. "Almost got me there."

"Almost? That was my cleanest critical headpat to date. I could almost hear the pokeman low health beep coming from you." Yui laughed uncontrollably, a look of pure satisfaction on her face.

Yuuki, meanwhile, felt neither anger, nor amazement, only apathy. Her laugh was so infectious he felt like it made it all okay, somehow.

"That went exactly according to plan! I'm almost terrified of my own genius! You should've seen your face back there. I wish I'd taken a picture, good god. How do you feel, hmm? How do you feel right now?" Yui rocked from side to side, peering into his face from every possible angle.

Is it too late to take back what I said?

"Speechless, huh? Need a zing?"

"Anyway, I think I was wrong about you, Yui."

"Eh?"

"Maybe the seatmate killer... isn't all that bad after all."

Dubious means aside, the outcome itself was fine. In hindsight, the same could be said for last time. Maybe it was time to recognize the seatmate killer as part of Yui, instead of demonizing it.

Yui abruptly straightened her back out, putting on a serious look. "Uhh, you do know the seatmate killer thing is a lie... right?"

"Hmm? Didn't you literally say 'I'm the seatmate killer' just now?"

"It was a means to an end? Like, even Rio realizes this? You're the only one confused here."

"So it was all a charade?"

"Don't say it like that."

Wait, something doesn't add up then.

“Okay, so, if you’re not the seatmate killer, then what was that just now? How do you explain your suggestive behavior up until now?”

“I’m the seatmate killer and I *will* kill you.”

That was quick. Yuuki looked in amazement as Yui shot him a defiant stare, not speaking a word more. *Alright, then I’ll go.*

“So basically you, the real seatmate killer, pretended to be the fake seatmate killer to finish Rio off for good and then tried picking me off on the side. I see... you might’ve gotten away with it too, if you weren’t up against me.” Yui was just about to add something, only to close her mouth shut at the very last second. She bitterly glared at him, so he reached his hand out, patting her on the head. “It’s okay though. I’m not mad or anything.”

Yui’s surprised face turned pink immediately. She reached her hand out, patting Yuuki in revenge. “Ow you cwyute little thing you!”

The two found themselves in this awkward double head patting scenario, yet Yui showed no sign of backing down. Quite the opposite, her patting only grew in intensity.

Eventually she tapped him on the head, stuck her tongue out and took a step back.

“Rio fell to me at long last. I won again... I want you to know defeat next. So can you, like, start crying and declare defeat already? Come on, come on.”

“How could this happen to me? I am crying.”

“Muahaha! Cower before the almighty seatmate killer, weakling!” Yui planted her hands against her hips, laughing evilly, her endearing self from earlier gone with the wind.

What a waste…

Her seven faces felt more like ten, twenty, maybe even a hundred. Whether or not Yuuki could pinpoint the real one, assuming he could peek inside her soul, was questionable at best.

The almighty seatmate killer, huh?

What was truth and what was fiction? Maybe the answer was surprisingly obvious, maybe not. Either way, it didn’t really matter. So long as Yui was smiling from the bottom of her heart, nothing did. For now, anyway.

Yuuki exhaled to clear his mind, facing forward.

Yui, who had walked ahead of him, turned around and began rushing him. “What’re you standing around for? Come on!” A car slid across the road, its

headlights illuminating Yui's body. She waved her arms, beckoning him over. "Over here!" She yelled with a smile. Yuuki nodded, slowly walking toward her.

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"Mom found the test sheets hidden deep inside one of your drawers and she's furious. Yui... were you seriously trying to pull a Nobita?"

The day after.

Maki entered Yui's room with no tricks or anything, carrying unfortunate news.

Yui's eyes shot open. She dropped her manga, hurling herself at Maki. "She went through my room without permission?!"

"She said she's slashing your allowance. That and limiting your video game time to one hour a day."

"Wh-What? Why?!"

"What do you mean why? Seems perfectly reasonable to me."

Curse you, satan's pawn. The true devil was right here all along! L*yu*cifer's antics were mere child's play compared to mom's unhinged cruelty.

That being said, Yui's video game addiction wasn't, in fact, the main reason behind her recent blunder.

Yui was constantly paranoid about Yuuki and Rio flirting behind her back, so much so that she failed to get any studying done. She'd sit down at her desk and just couldn't, for the life of her, concentrate. Video games helped her relax, yes, but the fact that, at the end of the day, it was all Yuuki's fault still remained.

Explaining this to Maki, however, was nothing short of self character suicide, a guaranteed lifetime of embarrassment.

What are best friends for, if not times like these?

Yui kicked Maki out of her room, took her phone and hit Rio up. Rio picked up before a single ring could finish.

"You wouldn't believe what just happened, Rio! So mom enters into my room right–"

"Yui. If I'm being completely honest to you as a friend, this is all on you. I painstakingly prepared very easy to understand notes and you still failed."

"Y-Yeah, you're right. Sorry for wasting your notes, Rio."

“This year’s midterms weren’t even that difficult to begin with…”

Expecting words of comfort, all Yui got instead was a lecture. Yui ended the call, having to apologize profusely before finally being let off the hook.

“Why do you have to be so hard-headed? This is your problem, Leo, this is your problem.”

Yui scrolled through her address book, her fingers halting at the name Yuuki.

She had accidentally blurted out something she shouldn’t have recently. Yui quickly covered up the resulting awkward atmosphere, which only drove her further into her lies.

That idiot probably didn’t even notice. Although, it did reveal potential in acting vulnerable. He can be quite kind sometimes… Yui thought, mustering up the courage to phone him.

It took Yuuki a while to pick up but, after way too many attempts, he eventually did. “Yes?”

She sniffed. “Something horrible just happened.”

“You’re the enemy, seatmate killer.”

Yui hung up immediately. *Rio was better than this...*

“Curses, curses! I’ll make you fall for me, you’ll see!”

The seatmate killer proceeded to cry into her pillow that night.

Side Story

Seatmate Breaker

Fourth period ended, ushering in lunch break.

The class quickly turned noisy, a male classmate walking up to Rio's male seatmate.

"Let's grab a bite and then we can... the thing."

"Dude, quiet, she'll hear."

"Ugh, don't tell on us, girlfriend!"

Rio paid their cackles no heed. She cleared out her desk, took out her phone and booted up Line. In response to her DM of "how about lunch tomorrow?" Yui wrote "okey dokey! I'll come meet you this time."

Rio put the phone away with a smile on her face. She got up from her seat, her eyes meeting with her seatmate's as she reached for her bag. "What?" The two shot her cautious looks, a deck of mahjong cards clutched in the hands of the non seatmate. "Are those…" Just as Rio opened her mouth, she saw Yui out of the corner of her eye, waving in the hallway.

Rio turned toward her, waving back with a smile. She herself was shocked at how naturally it came; there was no more awkward stiffness.

Rio returned her gaze, only to find the two gawking at her, frozen like stone statues. She giggled at the sight, asking, "Yes?"

"Err, uhh…"

They averted their gazes, mumbling incoherently.

"Don't let the teacher catch you with that or they'll confiscate it." Rio said, pointing at the guy with the card deck.

She then promptly took out her lunch bag and went out into the hall to meet up with Yui.

"You could've come in, you know."

"Was too busy listening in on your conversation, sorry."

"Weirdo."

"I have to say, you really broke those guys down, eh? Seatmate breaker." Yui joked, patting Rio on the shoulder.

The seatmate breaker, huh? Yuuki's face flashed before her eyes. *Yui's the seatmate killer and I'm the seatmate breaker. Has a surprisingly nice ring to it.* She thought, a smile stretching across her face.

They then went down to the first floor, stopping by a vending machine on the way.

Rio inserted a few coins, punched in her beverage of choice near instantly and took it out.

"Eww, you're seriously going to drink that?" Yui said, pointing at it with a sour look on her face.

"Ew? It's delicious. Yuuki said he likes it too."

"H-He did? When?"

"Uh, good question."

The two conversed as they went outside, heading down the same path Rio had walked countless times alone. Her once heavy, cumbersome steps were now light, springy.

The two engaged in leisurely chatter as they arrived at the secret spot.

Today was Yui's second time there. She was shocked the first time but this time she sat down on the concrete protrusion like she owned the place.

Rio sat down beside her. They then took out their bentos, placing them onto their laps.

Yui immediately took a peek at Rio's. "Trade you for a piece of fried chicken."

"Tamagoyaki, please."

The two merrily exchanged grub.

As they were about to dig in, footsteps followed by a figure appearing before them. It was Yuuki, a bag hanging from his hand.

"Huh? Why are you here?"

"I invited him."

"Why didn't you tell me?!"

Yui exclaimed as Yuuki awkwardly scratched his head. He didn't know Yui would be here either; it was all Rio's idea.

"Come sit here Yuuki. Have some pity for her."

"Next to the seatmate killer? I'd rather…"

"Hmm? You'd rather what?"

"I'm the seatmate killer, after all."

Yui lied not to trick Rio, not even to save her own skin; she was just a terrible, terrible liar. Yui likely self-sabotaged like this many times before.

Her affection for Yuuki was painfully obvious by now, especially to someone seeing it from the side. Which is why Rio wanted to just scream

“no, you’re not!” She wanted to convey Yui’s true, lie-free feelings to Yuuki.

But, at the same time, she didn’t want to waste Yui’s sacrifice either. Rio was, after all, a loser, a loser who fell head over heels for the seatmate killer. All she could do was wait, praying for the next challenger to succeed.

“Turn the tables on her... the seatmate killer.”

Rio whispered to Yuuki, sitting beside her, only to get a confused look. She quickly smiled and, after being caught by surprise for a moment, so did he.

“Wh-What did you just tell him, Rio?! You’re up to no good! I can feel it!”

“Don’t speak with your mouth full.”

“Stay, out, of, this!”

Rio’s quiet spot had turned into a lively battlefield.

How long their battle would last, how it would end: all remained a mystery. For now, all Rio wanted was to patiently watch the two’s awkward journey.

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